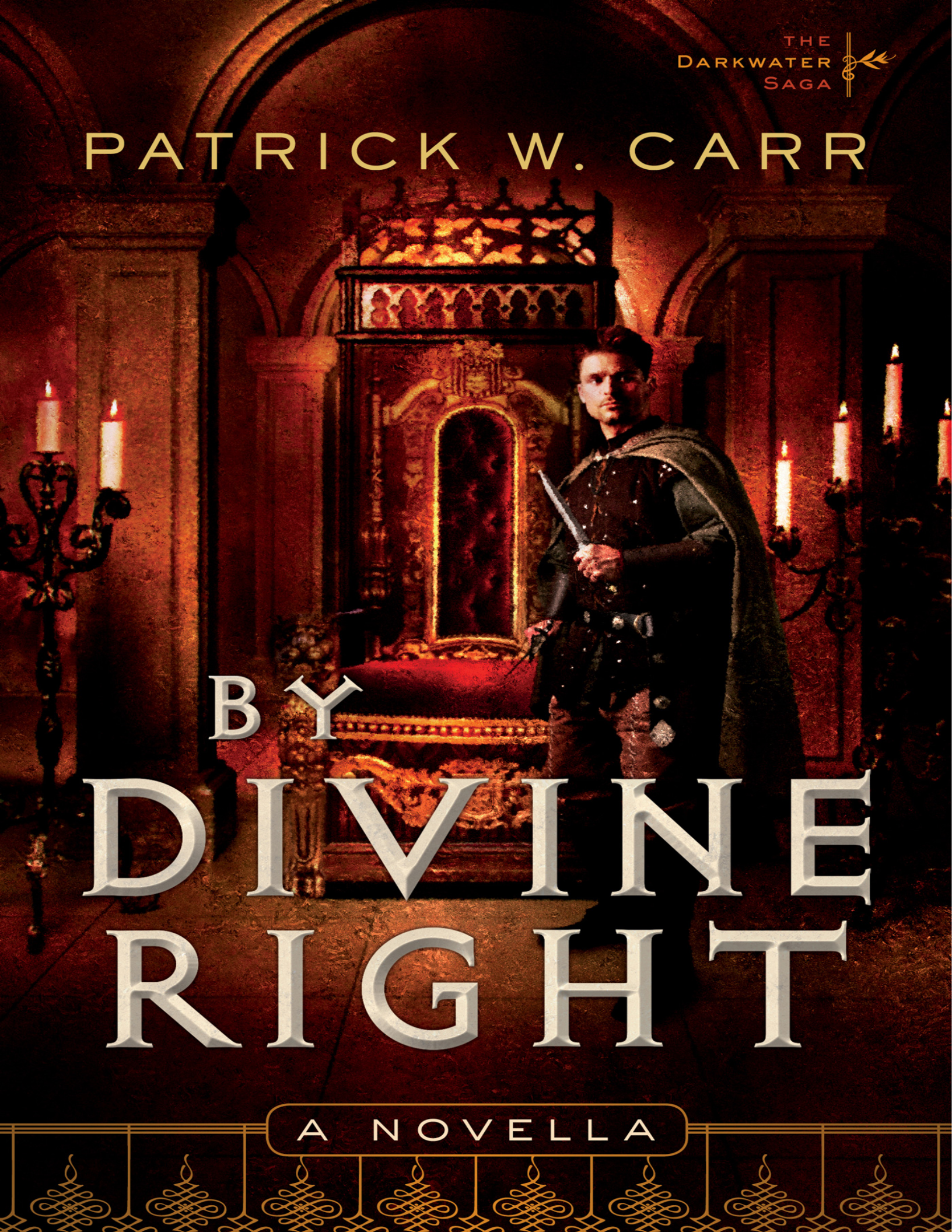
THE DARKWATER SAGA
PATRICK W. CARR
BY DIVINE RIGHT
A NOVELLA

THE DARKWATER SAGA

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A NOVELLA

PATRICK W. CARR

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*The Exordium of the Liturgy—*

*The six charisms of Aer are these:*

*For the body, beauty and craft*
*For the soul, sum and parts*
*For the spirit, helps and devotion*

*The nine talents of man are these:*

*Language, logic, space, rhythm,*
*motion, nature, self, others, and all*

*The four temperaments of creation are these:*

*Impulse, passion, observation, and thought*

*Within the charisms of Aer, the talents of man,*
*and the temperaments imbued in creation*
*are found understanding and wisdom. Know and learn.*

# Chapter 1

The unaccustomed fatigue that weighted my arms and legs and filled my head with sand should have warned me, but I didn't yet suspect I'd already been in the city that morning. I stepped out of the small windowless room I shared with Gareth into early dawn in the city of Bunard. The view from my vantage point in the watch barracks of King Laidir's tor would never compete with those higher up, but even so I looked down on most of the city. Only the towers of the four cathedrals at the north end of the nobles' quarter rose above me.

A hint of orange, like the first tentative swipe of a painter's fire, lit the sections of the city divided from each other according to station and income by the broad gray flows of the Rinwash River. Farthest south, I could just make out the poor quarter, a warren of wooden buildings in a constant state of disrepair populated by those whose livelihoods it was my duty to curtail.

A hint of movement, perhaps a cart hauling vegetables across one of the massive arched stone bridges spanning the Rinwash, drew my gaze north to the lower merchants' quarter. The sprawl of modest homes was filled with simple tradesmen whose lives were defined by the goods they provided to the city of Bunard and the kingdom of Collum it ruled. Somewhere down in their crowded midst lay the home that had birthed me, but not the family. Only stone and wood endured.

Closer to the tor still, came the upper merchants' quarter. The houses were still quite close together, but they commanded more space, and if lights burned in them at this early hour it would be by

the servants' bidding, not the owners. The master merchants, those who often held partial gifts, had amassed fortunes large enough that their owners almost wielded power on a level with Laidir's nobles. All they lacked was a title.

I began my descent, unable to avoid catching sight of the nobles' quarter, closer to the tor than any save the cathedrals of the four orders, their estates here in the city only slightly less massive than their keeps perched high on the hills and mountains of the lands governed by the king. In Bunard, each estate sat on an acre or more of land, separated from its fellows by suspicion and high granite walls.

Directly below my perch I looked almost straight down to the wide stretch of the Rinwash that separated Laidir's seat from all others, a thousand-year-old reminder of the continent's divine order. I descended the tor and set my feet toward the guardroom, where my superior, Jeb, would be waiting to give me my duty assignment for the day.

I nodded to the guard at the door.

"Going back into the city already, Willet?" Actus asked.

I squeezed my eyes shut and groped for a response that would conceal my ignorance. "Drawing double duty always makes me wonder what I did to displease Aer."

"Agreed." The answer came in a clear tenor that didn't match the grizzled face and graying hair that went with it. "I didn't know you had drawn it as well."

*Oh, Aer, where had I been?* I nodded without answering and moved past Actus into the domed rock cavern at the base of Laidir's tor that housed the city watch and the prison cells justice demanded.

I stopped to check my clothes for blood once I'd passed from Actus's view, pulling my cloak around to examine the edges before I rolled my wrists to check my sleeves. I breathed a silent prayer of relief. They were clean.

"What's the matter with you, Willet Dura?" a voice called. "Hurry up. You're late."

I straightened myself and my clothes and reported. The question, like so many from the captain, didn't require an answer.

Jeb looked me up and down, his huge hands flexing as they always did whenever their owner was in thought. Like the rest of us in the watch, Jeb bore scars from the last war with Owmead nine years prior. What made him different was that all of his scars seemed to be on his flesh, a fact that made me jealous enough to dislike him on a regular basis.

"You'll be with me, Dura, since you've already seen the body. Congratulations—you don't have to sneak around on this one."

I nodded, trying not to look surprised, before I demurred. "Shouldn't someone else go, Captain? I've never investigated a killing before."

Jeb barked, a sound meant to convey amusement, but only a deaf man would call it laughter. "No one said anything about murder, Dura."

A shock of fear went through me as I realized my blunder. As quickly as I could, I blinked and shook my head as if trying to clear the cobwebs of too little sleep. "Someone's dead and you're going out. I just assumed . . ."

"Willet Dura, you are a reeve," Jeb said. His face wore the smile of someone enjoying the opportunity to provide correction. "You can't afford to assume anything, and you wouldn't be investigating this if it was a murder. He died because he was old. You're there to talk to the priest. I don't like priests, especially from the Merum order. All those robes and chants annoy me." He clenched a scarred fist with knuckles that had been forged from something harder than bone and the sound of popping crackled in the air.

I shook my head, not understanding. "Why does a priest need to be there?"

Jeb's long face, his lantern thrust forward, registered the faint disgust a teacher might wear with a slow student. "Because he was gifted, Dura."

As we left the watch, fear banished the remainder of my fatigue. Jeb didn't know yet that the old man had been killed, but as much as I tried to deny the knowledge myself, I knew otherwise. For nine

years—along with countless others both within the king's watch and out of it—I'd borne my share of wounds from the last war. Some spoke seldom and regarded strangers with suspicion. Others were assaulted by memories so real that they took up weapons to fight phantoms from the past, their war cries high and plaintive and alone. The responses to the horrors of war were as unique as the men who waged it.

But some few were like me—night-walkers, men who left their beds without thought or volition to wander the streets of the city and return before awareness dawned. Most tried to deflect the attention it brought behind jokes or offhand comments regarding sleeplessness, or even admission, but we all shared the fear that came with the knowledge that our minds were in some fundamental way broken by the war.

Even there I felt a twinge of jealousy, wishing my night walks were simple enough to afford me some camaraderie with my fellows. But the morning after every night walk there would be a report of a killing in Bunard, and sometimes there was blood on my cloak or sleeves.

It had taken me a year to piece together the fabric of reason I hoped was the truth, and during the last eight years I'd secretly investigated every such murder that had happened in the sleeping hours of the night. Most of the time there was enough evidence to exonerate me.

Most of the time.

Doubt can eat a hole right through a man.

We crossed two bridges in succession and came to the higher merchants' section, riding south along the main street until we could just see the next bridge over the Rinwash. Already, I could hear the sounds of enterprise coming from the smithies, cobblers, and countless other crafts that fed and equipped the city.

The old man's body lay close to the entrance of a side street, little more than an alley, really, his arms and legs splayed as if he'd been a marionette and someone had cut all his strings at once. I stared, but nothing about the body looked familiar. I had expected it—recollection was always denied to me. Still, whispers of self-suspicion

ghosted across my mind. A Merum priest, his red stole of office stark in the subdued light of dawn, consoled a blond-haired man who looked to be in his midtwenties.

"How am I supposed to care for my family?" the man asked. I could tell by the way his voice rose toward the end that it wasn't the first time he'd asked the question.

"You're young," the priest said. "If you cannot provide for them through music, you can still learn a trade. Every man and woman has a talent, some more than one."

The young man jerked as if he'd been slapped. "Stupid priest," he snarled. "My father was the king's musician. Who will pay me as a musician when the gifted are available? And who takes a twenty-four-year-old apprentice?" He shook his head in disgust, his blond hair lashing the air in futile strikes, before he walked away.

Jeb barked a laugh. "Poor kid. He'll have to live life like the rest of us *gnath*."

I blinked at Jeb's use of the crude term for the ungifted, and I saw the Merum priest straighten in surprise. The epithet was usually reserved for use by the nobility. For a moment, the temptation to join in Jeb's derision threaded its way through my thoughts before I pushed it down. The blond-haired man had never expected anything from life but his father's blessing and gift. He wasn't prepared for life without it.

I turned and gave the priest the bow and greeting that had been instilled in me during the years I'd been a postulant. "May Aer be with you."

His eyes widened. "Were you a priest?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Almost, but I had to go to war." I saw his brows knit with curiosity, but I had no desire to dredge the past, and I waved his unspoken questions away. "It's a long story, without a good ending."

The priest nodded, his brown hair lifting a bit in the early morning breeze so that it framed his earnest face like a halo. "The orders will have to alert their sister houses in the other kingdoms to be on the lookout for a free gift of beauty." He started as if he hadn't meant to say that out loud. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should be consoling Ian's

family instead of complaining, but gifts going free instead of being passed down are rare, and this is the second one this month." He shrugged. "It's a lot of writing."

The word *rare* caught my attention. Before the kings and queens of the north cooperated with the church on curtailing gift stealing hundreds of years ago, the gifted had lived in danger. Now, stealing a family's gift carried an absolute death penalty. It didn't matter your station or your connections, if you were caught stealing a gift, you died—and quickly. "How often does a gift go free?"

The priest shook his head at me. "Once every couple of years someone will hang on too long and their heart will give out or they'll have a stroke before they can manage to put their hands on an heir." He held one hand palm up. "Sometimes there's an accident, but even then the holder has to die so quickly that they can't perform the rite of blessing and pass on their gift." He looked at the old man lying in a heap before turning his back to leave. "I have letters to write."

A crowd had begun to gather, and Jeb worked his way around, getting close so that each onlooker got a visceral sense of his size. The dust around the old man was undisturbed. He hadn't been dragged there. Had I been wrong? I didn't know whether to feel disappointed or relieved. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be like other men, with nothing more than the occasional meaningless night walk to remind them they'd been in the last war. What would it be like not to live in fear of yourself?

I had almost put my suspicions to rest when I noticed the boots on the man's feet. The gifted weren't always rich. It depended on how pure the gift and how well the one holding it could utilize it to turn a profit, abilities more aligned with a man or woman's talent and temperament rather than their gift. The old man's boots were solid and well made, but not luxurious. Boots like them could be found on any moderately successful merchant, but the heel of this one had a nail that had worked loose.

I stepped up onto the wooden porch and knelt by the body. Putting my hand against the grain of the pine, I pushed my thumbnail against the surface. It left a well-defined scratch. Working

quickly to avoid Jeb's notice, I pulled the old man's boot from his foot and pressed it against the wood of the porch. It left a rectangular indentation in the pine, as if a craftsman had used a punch on the wood.

Replacing the boot, I got down on my hands and knees and looked across the porch, my nose pressed into the grit and grain. The wood wasn't new, and there were scratches and gouges aplenty, but none of them matched the mark left by the boot nail.

Jeb barked at me from above. "What are you doing, Dura? Where's the priest?"

I scrambled up and took a step back. Sometimes when Jeb was annoyed he'd hit the source of that irritation. "He left, sir," I said. I didn't bother to answer the first question.

"Sir," I said when Jeb turned away, "there's something here you need to see."

He looked at me as if he couldn't decide to ignore me or not. "What?"

I pointed to the old man's boot and sped through my suspicions as quickly as I could. Jeb closed in on me until my eyes were as close to his chin as his. "Listen to me, Dura. You do what I tell you. I brought you here because you know how to speak the language of the church. You've been pleading to work the deaths in the city for years, but it's not going to happen."

I nodded. "Yes, sir." I kept my voice low. People who corrected Jeb in public recuperated in private. "But if you'll just look at the boots."

"You want me to treat this as a murder because some old fool didn't take care of his boots before he died? Do you know what kind of hornet's nest a gifted's murder would stir up?" He leaned back to take a better look at me. "The church and the king would be all over us." He pointed at the old man's form. "This man's killer doesn't exist because he dropped dead from a stroke," Jeb hissed. "Get out of here."

# Chapter 2

I knew better than to argue, so I left Jeb and the other members of the city watch behind and let my feet and mind wander the streets. I'd drawn my usual assignment to the poor quarter for the month, a duty that I shared with Gareth. I took a side street along the way, just short of the bridge that led into the section of the city where the widows, orphans, and elderly that comprised the city's destitute, scratched out a living—legally or otherwise.

Halfway down the street I turned right. A couple of hundred paces later I caught sight of my destination, a run-down Merum parish church in need of fresh thatch and a slew of other repairs. The sun barely cleared the roofs of the surrounding buildings, but Ealdor would be there, as always.

Those who survived the war endured by different means, each man or woman who'd borne arms struggling to live in the aftermath of horror by whatever methods they could devise. Most turned to strong drink, especially those like me who were night-walkers. You couldn't wander if you were too drunk to find the door. They didn't last long. I'd already seen half a dozen to the House of Passing, King Laidir's hospice just outside the city, and beyond.

Others just gritted their teeth and tried to pretend the acts of violence we practiced on others made in Aer's image were fleeting temporary things, best forgotten. I avoided such men or women. They trusted seldom, and the horror ate at them a little more with each denial until the last spark of kindness and affection had been extinguished.

I entered the shadowed interior of Ealdor's church. "Aer be with you," I called. He'd be here somewhere. I'd see him stride out of the gloom and we'd go kneel at the confession rail and I'd talk, surviving the remembrances of war by forcing myself back into wounds that never healed. But Ealdor had helped me believe there was more to the world than the senselessness of death.

He came out of the shadows, smiling and draping his purple stole over his shoulders as if he'd been expecting me. "Good morning, Willet." He looked past me to the empty entrance to see if anyone else had come with me. No one ever had. His hand, warm and comforting, found my shoulder and guided me toward the weathered altar at the front of the church. Chips showed where the veneer had come loose from the wood underneath. Like the rest of Ealdor's domain, it stood in desperate need of repair.

"Why don't you ask your parishioners for a contribution to fix this place?" I asked. I almost always asked.

It was a well-practiced conversation. "I want them to take care of themselves and each other," Ealdor said. "We'll fix the church when it's time."

I dug at my waist for my purse. The pay of an assistant reeve wasn't much, but a few silver pennies would buy some minor repairs at least.

Ealdor's hand came to rest on top of mine. "You know I won't take your money, Willet. You're on your way to the poor quarter, yes?" When I nodded, he went on. "Then save your money for those it will help the most." He cast a look over his shoulder and his smile quirked to one side of his mouth. "There's no one else here. Would you like to celebrate haeling?"

I made a point of coming when no one else would be there. A thrill ran through me mixed of equal parts anticipation and the exhilaration of risk. I wasn't a priest. I'd missed that distinction by a week. After I'd struck blows that could never be recalled and shed the blood of others, the orders of the Merum priesthood had been placed beyond my reach forever.

He reached up and draped his stole across my shoulders. "The one who presides wears this."

I let my fingers brush across the purple fabric. It didn't feel any different than my cloak, but I luxuriated in the sensation all the same. Stepping behind the time-worn altar I saw that Ealdor had the implements of haeling already prepared, and I smiled. I'd long ago given up trying to figure out how he always seemed to know when I would be coming. If my experience in the war allowed my sleeping mind to sense death, perhaps Ealdor's station as a priest of Aer allowed him to foretell my arrival.

Or maybe he always had haeling ready to celebrate. I didn't bother to ask. Mystery intrigued me. Raising my hands as I'd seen other priests do thousands of times, I issued the call to Ealdor, the mice, the voles, and any other of Aer's creatures that might be present. "Iosa be with you."

Later, Ealdor replaced the chalice and wafer cup beneath the altar and led the way to the confession rail. "How are you sleeping?" he asked.

I knelt across from him, rolling my shoulders one at a time, as if I could shed the weight his question placed on me. "The same. It's well enough, except when there's been a death. Then I wake in my clothes and one of the watch guards will comment on my wanderings and I find myself checking my cloak for blood." I shrugged. "Some of them must suspect that I'm a night-walker, but they don't say anything. Everyone carries scars from the war." I looked down at my hands, noticed my fingers absently tapping the weathered grain of the rail and curled them into fists so their wanderings couldn't betray my thoughts.

But Ealdor knew me as well as I knew myself, it seemed. "What about the women, Willet?"

I stared at him. "What women?"

He smiled, but his eyes contradicted the expression. "My point exactly. You're almost thirty. It's past time to surrender your dreams

of the priesthood and find a wife."

I looked down at the time-battered rail. "I forfeited the priesthood with the first sword stroke that took another man's life."

"Then why wait?" Ealdor pressed.

"I don't know who I am," I whispered. "What if I'm not innocent?"

Ealdor's soft laugh mocked my self-pity. "None of us are."

"You know what I mean," I said. "Sometimes I wake with blood on my cloak or sleeves. We don't always find the killer."

Somehow, Ealdor's posture grew serious enough to match his tone without moving. "Evil exists, but it can't force a man to do what a man doesn't want to do." Then he relaxed. "Are there no women who have caught your eye?"

I shrugged. "Of course there are. I saw one this morning on my way out of the keep." I gave myself to the memory that I'd etched into my mind as though it had been carved into the most obdurate stone. "The sun was just above the roofline, the light soft and orange. I saw her in profile. Her hair was tied back. I wanted nothing more in that moment than to reach up and undo the ribbon that bound it so I could see it cascade across her shoulders."

Ealdor smiled at me. "I've always suspected there was a poet lurking somewhere with you. What could it hurt to say something to her?"

I stared at him as if he were daft. "She's a noble."

"She's a woman."

"And completely out of reach," I said flatly. I shook my head. "Besides, I think I rather prefer women at a distance."

Ealdor nodded. "That way the reality of them can't disappoint you and you don't have to risk anything."

"That's a very annoying habit you have," I said.

"She's not why you came here though," Ealdor said with a lift of his brows. "You woke up in your clothes again, didn't you."

I nodded. "It was an old man. Jeb is convinced he had a stroke, but there was a protruding nail on his boot and no marks on the wooden porch his body was on to match it. If he did have a stroke, why would someone bother to move him?"

Ealdor looked at me without blinking, the way he did whenever I tried to dissemble or shade the truth. “That’s not what convinced you he was murdered, was it?”

After a moment I shook my head. “No.”

“You don’t wander every time someone’s died, Willet,” Ealdor said. “You’ve as much as told me.”

“No,” I sighed. “Only when someone’s been murdered.”

Ealdor nodded. “That sounds like a useful tool for a reeve.”

“And something that could get me burned as a witch.” I laughed. “Especially if I tell anyone when it started happening.” A memory of trees—their trunks like the tortured shapes of men towering around me—painted itself across the backdrop of Ealdor’s church, and I shook my head to clear it.

“The priest at the scene told me it was the second gift that had gone free this month,” I said.

His eyes widened as if I’d finally found something to say that surprised him. “That’s unusual.” Then he shrugged. “But looked at in a certain light, Willet, the unusual happens every day. Did you night-walk on the previous death?”

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. I didn’t always have the confirmation of the morning guard to tell me when I’d wandered from my bed. “Something about this doesn’t smell right.”

Ealdor patted my hand. “Then you should investigate. Isn’t that what reeves do?”

“Jeb’s told me to stay away from it. He’s afraid of the attention it might attract if we even breathe the words *gift stealing*.”

Ealdor smiled at me. “He’s the tall one with the fists, right?”

I gave him a vigorous nod. “That’s the one.”

He grew serious, the façade of amusement dropping from him, and he leaned forward across the rail that separated us until our heads almost touched. “Do the right thing first, Willet, and you may find the grace of Aer and his son, Iosa, and his spirit, Gaoithe, in some unusual places.”

I deflected the command with a grin. “Let’s hope it’s in the poor quarter. That’s my duty assignment for the day.”

Ealdor rose from his kneeling position, and I mirrored him. “The destitute are like servants, Willet. Even when they’re present most people never see them at all.”

I nodded my thanks and left the church.

# Chapter 3

Crossing the southernmost bridge of the Rinwash was like entering a world where the shroud of human despair, kept at bay with the distractions that wealth could buy, had at last managed to leach the color from the surroundings. All too often, what wasn't faded was covered in dirt or grime, the residents too busy with the work of simple survival to worry with appearances. Yet in the smiles and greetings friends gave to each other across ramshackle fences or narrow spaces between buildings that leaned toward one another, I saw flickers of light and life displayed, fighting against the dark.

For a change, there was nothing specific in my duty assignment, no murders or high-profile thefts in the other sections of the city, and I breathed a sigh of relief. We didn't bother trying to run down the pickpockets or women who walked the night, reserving our efforts for more serious crimes.

"Good morning, Willet," a woman's voice purred from the entrance to a dark side street where I hoped to find a particular thief.

I turned, the smile already on my face, at the greeting. "Constance." The woman was perhaps a year or two younger than I, her story so common in our kingdom, it hardly merited a footnote. Her husband, Rolfe, had been conscripted after the last war and killed in a border skirmish. Constance, with a pair of children hardly walking, couldn't find enough honest work to keep them fed, so she bartered what she had left, selling her body to keep them fed.

I nodded toward the sun creeping higher. "It's too early to have that voice on, you know."

She laughed a sound that came out an octave higher than the greeting she'd given. "It's market day. If I get there early enough I can be back before the little ones wake."

I dug into the pocket of my cloak for a silver penny, one of the few I'd offered to Ealdor. "Here. Buy them some sweetmeats." I folded her hand over the coin when she tried to protest. "And stay away from men who look or feel wrong."

She gave me a saucy smile at odds with the sudden unshed tears in her eyes. "You know you just bought a pair of nights, don't you, Willet?"

I shook my head, careful not to laugh. The people who lived in the poor quarter guarded the dignity that remained to them with banter and social rules the rest of the city could hardly understand. "No, I bought a pair of precious lads some sweetmeats." What she did with the money would be up to her, but I needed to make it plain that it carried no obligation. "If you need to barter on their behalf, you could point me to Ilroy. I'd be grateful."

The poor quarter boasted a number of strange and illegal guilds. One of them, the urchins, comprised a collection of young pickpockets and thieves, a company of children whose parents had died or kicked them out. Life in Bunard—or any city, for that matter—could be cruel. Everyone knew it.

But in the midst of such indecency, somehow, many people found a way to be decent. Ilroy was such a one. He searched the poor quarter each week for those who'd been abandoned or orphaned and brought them in to such shelter as he could contrive and taught them a trade. To Laidir's credit, the king forbade the city watch from doing more than striping those who were caught— a punishment any of the urchins could easily withstand without endangering their livelihood.

Constance's face fell. "I'm sorry, Willet. Ilroy's dead—last night. He fell off a roof and broke his neck."

I felt sick and my breakfast shifted in my gut like it wanted to visit from the other direction. "Who heads the urchins now?"

She kept her face neutral. "Rory."

I didn’t bother to stop the sigh that whispered from me even though I’d known for a couple of years Rory would take over the urchins someday. Ruthlessly talented and fiercely dedicated to rescuing the children who ended up in the poor quarter, he nevertheless divided the world into two parts: the poor quarter and the enemy. More than once when I’d searched out Ilroy looking for information, Rory had made it plain he grouped me with the enemy.

“Where can I find him?”

Constance pointed west toward a particularly rough part of the quarter that guards in the city watch called the Gulch for the canyon-like feel of the tall buildings that kept the sunlight from touching the ground. “At the end of Butcher’s Alley. Be careful, Willet.”

I nodded my thanks and checked the sun. A city watchman had to be an idiot to go into the Gulch at night—and close to it to venture there during the daytime. My shoulder blades itched with the feeling of being watched as soon as I entered the oily shadows cast by buildings that almost touched each other over the alleyway that ran parallel to Butcher’s Street. They didn’t slaughter animals there anymore, but the stench of other unsavory practices still made me gag.

The first thing a newcomer to the urchins learned was how to hide. They practiced the art until a boy or girl of ten could disappear into a shadow no wider than the flat of a man’s hand. Then they learned how to throw a knife, practicing until their skill approximated sorcery. I’d seen urchins hanging upside down from their knees hit a target no bigger than a silver crown from ten paces away. If I startled the wrong person, I could end up dead before I realized I’d taken a blade through the eye. I kept to the sliver of sunlight in the middle of the alley. Most of the urchins knew me by now, but newcomers drew sentry duty often enough to make this dangerous.

As if the thought had conjured it, a blade whistled within inches of my face to lodge in the wood of the wall on my left. I made a show of raising my hands and spoke to the air without turning to look for the owner of the knife. “If you’re part of the urchins, you should know me.”

A girl with stringy hair and smudges on her freckled face stepped out of the shadows on my right. We'd met before.

"Why the knife, Pogue?" I asked.

"Rory's orders," she said, pulling the blade loose from the splintered wood. "He wants everyone to know the urchins can defend themselves."

"Ilroy made sure everyone knew that already," I said.

She shrugged. Like all of the urchins, she was a few pounds shy of well fed and I could see the top of her collar bones pushing against her dirty shirt. "Rory thinks someone might have given Ilroy a push off that roof."

I made an effort not to peer into the shadows around us. Rory could have ears on Pogue and me. He might be listening himself, and I'd already learned with Jeb that you didn't dismiss a man's suspicions if you wanted something from him. "It's possible," I said. "What do you think?"

Pogue shrugged. "There might have been another thief up on the rooftops, but killing one of the urchins is hard. It was raining and the roof was made of slate. I've almost pitched off a time or two myself."

"I need to see Rory," I said. I pulled the token Ilroy had given me from my pocket, a square of red cloth with a crude blue circle stitched into the center of it.

She licked her lips, staring at the token before she nodded and turned toward the dead end of the alley. We descended stone steps into a low dirt-floored cellar, and I breathed a prayer that the ancient posts and beams supporting the structure above us would hold.

Rory was about thirteen, tall for an urchin, with the hands of a musician and a thatch of brown hair that he kept combed. He carried a lot of the load of supporting the group by being one of the best pickpockets in the city, and he had a thousand ways of making the bump into his target look accidental. I concentrated on keeping my hands away from my purse, as if I had no suspicion whatsoever that he might try to lift it from me.

"You let an outsider in here, yah?" Rory said to Pogue. His accent mimicked some of the southerners who traded in Collum.

"He had the token, Rory."

"He can't, yah? Because I'm the only one who's given them out," Rory said. He leaned forward, and the bend in his elbows suggested he might take a swing at the girl.

"It's Ilroy's," I said, stepping to the side a bit as I spoke so that I was partly between Rory and Pogue. If their conversation came to blows, I'd never get what I came for.

"Ilroy is dead," Rory said. "I run the urchins now."

I nodded. "Agreed. I'm willing to renegotiate the agreement I had with him." Maybe if I conceded up front my willingness to deal I could get him to trade for information, but the look in his eye made me want to check my purse to see how much remained in it.

He smiled. "Some things have more value than others, information included."

"I've always been willing to pay for it," I said.

He nodded. "Yes, but I will set the price."

I held up a hand. "Based on?"

"How desperate you are for it," Rory said, his smile growing.

I stifled the flash of anger that brought heat up my neck at being held up by a thirteen-year-old despot. More than anything I wanted to walk out of that low-roofed cellar and tell Rory his option of ultimate destinations, but I couldn't escape the obligation Bunard's poor placed on me. Paying Rory for his information allowed me to check on the children under his care and make sure they were fed.

But I needed to do my job. "I'll pay," I said, "but I need to speak with you alone." I took an exaggerated look around the dingy interior of the cellar that could have hidden a score of urchins. "Really alone, Rory. I can't afford this getting out."

He laughed! The little snot actually laughed at me.

"I'll be the judge of what you can afford." Pointing, he directed me outside, and we retraced our steps until we left the cellar and the alley behind. Out on the street, my eyes watered in the light.

"Now, Willet," Rory said. "Let's see if we can come to terms."

I checked to make sure no one was close enough to hear us before I ducked my head as if Rory stood in control of our conversation and I knew it. People in the poor quarter could read a man's posture as naturally as a priest read liturgy. They were on the

receiving end of all sorts of it. I kept my posture deferential. "Listen very carefully, Rory, because I'm not going to say this again. I won't allow you to hold me up. I'm going to buy information because I need it and because I want to help out the children you care for, but if you cross me, I'm going to bring a slew of city watch here and root you out of your hiding place and throw you in prison."

I lifted my head just enough for him to see how angry I was. "And I'll keep you there until the urchins find a new leader." I dug into my pocket for a pair of silver pennies, twice what I usually paid for information and held them out. I allowed a hint of anger to touch my voice. "I brought you here so no one would hear us, but don't make the mistake of thinking I'm a soft touch or that you can ever, ever, hold me up again. Do we understand each other?"

He had backbone—I'll give him that. Instead of being cowed, his eyes blazed their defiance as if they were lit from within, but he had brains as well. He knew I could do exactly what I said. The coins clinked softly as they came to rest in his palm. "What do you need to know?"

"An old man died last night in the lower merchants' section just across the poor quarter bridge. I want the tale from any eyes the urchins had in the area.

"And, Rory," I said as he turned to leave, "I'm pretty sure I know what happened, so don't try to have one of the lads make up something. If I want to buy tales I'll pay for them at Braben's tavern."

His mouth tightened and he gave me a stiff nod, as if his neck didn't want to bend. "Wait here."

He came back a few minutes later with a dark-haired boy of ten at his side. The lad never looked at me but cast furtive glances by turns behind him and over each of my shoulders, as if he expected trouble any moment. Judging by the dark cast to his skin and eyes, he had at least one parent from the southern reaches of the continent.

"This is Beda," Rory said. "He can't steal, so he begs for us. Sometimes he forgets to come back. Ilroy didn't fetch him home last night." He turned and bent so that his face was on a level with the boy's and cupped his face in both hands, forcing eye contact. "Beda,

this man wants to know what you saw last night. He's safe." Rory's tone was gentle and his moves slow and deliberate, but the boy flinched anyway.

Beda nodded and his eyes flicked once to mine before the glance hurried away, his chin following them as he tried to look everywhere but at me.

"It's all right, Beda," Rory said in the same tone of voice I'd heard horse trainers use on skittish colts. "He's safe."

Beda shook his head. "Tall."

I understood and dropped to my haunches on the dusty street. The boy's glance found mine for a bit longer this time, and he nodded.

"They dropped him, dropped him, and his arms and legs bounced like turnips," Beda said. He rocked back and forth, and his speech came out in rhythm to his motion.

"What did he look like, the man they dropped?" I asked.

"Old and used, like he was too small for his skin," Beda said. "His hair stuck out all around."

I nodded my confirmation with relief—that was him. "What about the men that dropped him, Beda?"

His mouth stretched and his eyes grew wide, until the whites showed around. Little mewing sounds came out in time to the rocking motion. Rory's hand found my shoulder. "That usually means someone reminds him of his father."

I wanted nothing more at that moment than to put my fist in that unknown man's face, but it was also information I could use. "What did he—"

Rory's hand dropped onto my shoulder quickly enough to surprise me. "Don't ask directly. He'll close down altogether. I've worked with him enough over the last few months to get you what you need to know."

"Where did they go, Beda, the men who dropped off the old man?" I asked.

His face relaxed from the horrified rictus he'd worn, and his rocking slowed. "North. They walked into the darkness until it swallowed them."

“What about their clothes, Beda?”

He almost smiled, and I caught a glimpse of the boy he might have been if his life hadn’t been twisted from its path. “Rich men trying to look ordinary,” Beda said. “Ragged cloaks, expensive boots.”

I caught Rory’s eye and chose my words to keep from setting Beda off again. “I need specifics, Rory—skin and hair color, scars, tattoos, whatever you can get.”

His mouth tightened. “Expensive information.”

I knew he wasn’t talking about money. I looked at poor broken Beda and nodded. “Get it as gently as you can.”

Rory knelt, shaking his head, angry, but his voice stayed calm and soothing. “I saw a man once with darkened skin, like the wood from a night oak tree. The men last night?”

Beda’s eyes widened a fraction, but his rocking stayed smooth and steady.

Rory gave me a small shake. The men weren’t from Aille in the south or from the southern continent. “I saw another man with skin like lamplight or olive oil. The men last night?”

Nothing changed in Beda’s posture, and disappointment settled in my gut. Whoever had dumped the old man on the street looked like anyone else on the streets of Bunard.

“I saw a man,” Rory said, “with a scar on his face.”

Beda’s mouth dropped open and his rocking increased.

“Is that enough?” Rory asked. “I’m about to lose him.”

I shook my head. “Narrow it down. Half the veterans from the last war are walking around with scars on their faces. Vertical, horizontal, left, right, forehead, cheek, chin.”

Rory pulled a deep breath and looked on the verge of refusing, but he put his hands on little Beda’s shoulders and spoke more softly still. “I once saw a man with a scar on the left side of his face . . .” No change. “ . . . on the right side of his face . . .” Still no change. “ . . . on his forehead.”

Beda’s rocking increased, and his fingers fluttered at his side, like the wings of a bird trying to fly away. Rory caught them and held them with as much care and tenderness as any human had ever

shown another. “I saw a man with a horizontal scar on his forehead,” Rory said.

Beda’s rocking didn’t increase but his eyebrows drew together a fraction. “He doesn’t understand the word,” I said.

Rory nodded. “I saw a man with a scar on his forehead like another eyebrow.”

Beda’s face crumpled and little mewing sounds came from him.

I stood as if I carried Beda’s affliction like a weight across my shoulders and put my hand on Rory’s arm. “That’s enough. I don’t think they can hide from me now.”

Rory gathered Beda into a hug, as if he could protect that broken little boy from me and my questions. He lifted his head and called back into the alley. “Pogue!”

The girl came and lifted Beda in a hug, carrying him away.

Rory turned a gaze on me of alloyed disgust, anger, and shame, as if I’d forced him into some act of degradation. I deserved every bit of it. “How long will he be like that?”

“Until he sleeps, but that may be two or three days. Every time he remembers his father it gets a little bit worse.”

I dug into my purse and pulled out another silver penny. “Go to the apothecary in the lower merchants’ section on Hile Street. Tell him I sent you for two drams of absinthe. He’s honest with his potions. It’ll let Beda rest.”

“You think this squares us, yah?” Rory asked in his sarcastic accent.

I didn’t bother to look angry, defensive, or anything else. “Friend, I’ll never make that much money.” I walked away before he could respond.

# Chapter 4

Picking pockets would earn a man a striping. Robbing a man's home would get you thrown in prison or, in the case of repeat offenders, enough lashes to put you in danger of your life. Laidir wouldn't let the reeves take off a hand anymore. The kingdom needed every able-bodied man for war, if and when it came. A charge of murder would get a man thrown in prison until evidence could be gathered for a trial. Then, if found guilty, he would be scheduled for execution.

But gift stealing, if proven, would result in summary execution. Right then. Right there. And every man and woman in any kingdom on the northern continent was expected to carry it out. In the eyes of the church there was no greater crime than forcing a man or woman to surrender the gift their family had received from Aer to someone else. According to the four orders that embodied the faith, you weren't just stealing from a man or woman—you were robbing them and all their descendants through the centuries of the gift they were to use to glorify Aer, serve the kingdom, and earn a living.

Most of the pure gifted had risen to become nobility over the long centuries, while the partially gifted had become merchants and artisans in service to their respective king or queen, who in turn held the most important and rarest gift of all: the gift of kings.

I crossed into the lower merchants' section of the city, trying not to think of centuries filled with bloodshed as powerful men and women fought for the gift that would proclaim them ruler, the encompassing gift Aer had given to a select few, supposedly to allow them to reign with wisdom and compassion.

What reason would any noble have to steal a gift—or charisms, as the priests called them—when they already owned a gift and all the wealth that went with it? And why one as inconsequential as the physical gift of beauty? Of all the possible intersections between Aer's gift and a man's talent, music was commonly deemed one of the least profitable, no matter how pleasurable it might be to the ear.

The sweet smell of honeyed meats pulled me to a stall on Market Street where I bought lunch and dates covered with crushed almonds. I ate the mutton on the way and slipped the leaf-wrapped sweets into my cloak.

The sun stood at noon when I entered the shadow of the Merum cathedral. The oldest of the four orders, it boasted the most extensive library and the most peculiar librarian. An acolyte in white escorted me through the halls that centuries of construction had contrived to join together into a maze, and I let the familiar regret of my lost profession wash over me.

The librarian would be back among the shelves, sorting and reading, his hands deft among the sheets of parchment, books, and scrolls. I diverted to a bookcase I picked at random, pulled a dusty volume from the crowd, and opened it to a page near the middle. I marked it with my thumb and hid it behind my back.

Custos, the librarian, and I had a custom dating back years to when I'd been an acolyte in these halls.

I found him by the shelves of theology, the largest section of all.

"Hello, my boy. You haven't visited in a while." His eyes, sharp like a bird's, peered at me with a mixture of curiosity, amusement, and challenge.

"I need help, old friend."

He drew himself up in mock affront. "You know my price."

I laughed. I did indeed. Reaching into my cloak I withdrew the fistful of dates, but when he reached for them, I held them out of reach. I was of average height, but Custos stood a hand shorter than me.

"You dare?" His eyebrows quivered in a pantomime of anger.

I pulled the book from behind my back. “Imposters abound,” I said. “Some foul miscreant might have stolen your likeness and taken your place.”

He snorted, his lips flapping at me. “Come then. Try me and you shall see.”

I read the title of the book. “A Treatise on the Darkened Age,” I said. Then I started reading from the middle of the book. “And it came about that in the fifth century that the kings and queens of earth agreed . . .”

“ . . . that whosoever possessed the gift of kings at the dawn of the next year would be granted rule,” Custos finished. He shuddered. “Horrible decision. Terrible bloodbath followed.”

I stared at him with my usual mixture of defeat and amazement. “How do you do that?”

He popped one of the surrendered dates into his mouth and winked at me, tapping his forehead. “I’ve told you—the library in here is just as you see it out there. Someday, perhaps, you will comprehend.”

I laughed my doubt at the idea. We were alone, but I whispered regardless. “Custos, someone is stealing gifts, but I don’t know why.”

He swallowed thickly, his throat cording with the effort. “The obvious reason why would be monetary gain, but you’re more than sharp enough to know that, so I’m going to assume you’ve seen something in the crime that means money’s not a motive.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. I wondered if he was hoping I might be gone when he opened them. “Iosa help us, you think there’s a noble involved.”

When he looked at me again, I nodded. “An old musician died last night.”

Custos nodded. “They told me, said it was a stroke. Ian Kells. I’ve already taken his name off the list of the gifted.”

“I’ve received confirmation that nobles are involved in his death,” I said. Then I thought about the fact that my confirmation came in the form of a ten-year-old boy whose mind shut down at the mere thought of his father. “Of sorts,” I added. “What can you tell me about Ian’s gift?”

Custos shrugged and pointed at the library. "You know my information is only as good as the store of facts contained within the library, extensive, but it doesn't hold everything."

I knew this from previous conversations but didn't see how it applied here. "What do you mean?"

Instead of answering he led me to a room within the library fronted by locked double doors of heavy wood dark with age. "Let me show you the actual records." He pulled out a key from somewhere inside the rumpled folds of his cassock, and we entered into broad space that looked no different than any other part of the library with the exception that there were more empty shelves there.

"We expand it every couple of centuries so that it will remain separate from the rest of the library. I imagine someday we'll have to enlarge the cathedral. Ian's record is over here."

He stepped to a case and pulled a red leather-bound book from a shelf toward the bottom. "This is the musician's case," Custos said with a wave of his arm. "Every gifted musician in the northern continent is recorded here along with their lineage."

Intrigued, I looked at the cases around the room, some much larger and holding more volumes than others. "There are more than six."

Custos nodded, tucking the book under his arm. "Yes, when the church first began to catalog the lineage of the gifted, we grouped them that way: beauty, craft, sum, parts, helps, and devotion. But over time, as the gifts were split, it became difficult to keep track of the information that way and we began categorizing the gifts by their intersection with each person's talent." He essayed a lopsided smile. "I imagine sometime in the future, long after we're dead, they'll have to begin cataloging it by temperament as well. Fortunately, I won't be around when that decision is made. Ugh, can you imagine all the writing?" He nodded to his right. "The musician's case is one of the largest. It would seem Iosa wanted music for his people when he sent his spirit. Come, I will show you something startling."

We walked around the long aisle, proceeding past the cases. I noticed the number of volumes decreasing and the size of each case

shrinking until we came to a case that held two lonely volumes on its solitary shelves. Custos reached out, his motions slow and reverent, and pulled the newer one from the shelf.

We were alone, but a sense of awe filled me and I spoke my question in hushed tones. "What is it?"

Custos put it into my hands, the leather, old and worn, and the binding stiff with disuse. "The book of the gift of kings." He shook his head in wonder. "You wouldn't think so much horror and bloodshed could be captured in the truncated genealogies of those who have held it."

I held the book as if it might turn into a viper at any moment and bite me. "I've heard people speak of it," I said. "Why is it so rare?"

Custos laughed. "I remember this from your days as an acolyte. You always had a penchant for asking short questions with long answers." He shrugged. "The gift of kings is the ability to administrate all the others. In that sense it takes a piece of the other gifts and combines them into something unique." He lifted one hand, seeing my confusion. "It's the same in any trade, really. The man who makes the best stone mason once hauled mortar and bricks. Each king or queen who carries the gift has an intimate knowledge of all the gifts in order to administrate and shepherd Aer's people. And the gift has never been split. Something in the way Aer designed it won't allow it. Every king or queen who's tried to bestow it upon more than one child has failed. A few times the gift went free. After a while, people stopped trying."

I shook my head. "I've never heard of Laidir playing a musical instrument or dancing or crafting wonders from copper and iron."

Custos smiled. "The manner of Laidir's gifting has brought something to the gift of kings few of his predecessors have—a sense of humility. Queen Ulrezia regularly plays the harp within her court, and across the mountains to the east, King Ellias spends his idle time fashioning art and armor in his own smithy."

"The manner of his gifting?"

"It came to his ancestor as a free gift a little over two hundred years ago. The clergy nearly refused to coronate a commoner. The

nobles threatened to rebel if they did, and the commoners threatened to revolt if they didn't."

What motivated a man? A priest's answer didn't vary much, whether they were from the Merum, Absold, Servants, or Vanguard orders. It didn't matter what color robe the priest wore, the reply centered on some or all of three categories: sex, coin, and power. And the greatest of these was power.

"What was it you wanted to tell me about Ian's gift?" I asked. I had an intuition about what was happening, but the theory scared me. I didn't have the power to investigate a noble. Only the king's castellan and his deputies could do that. Right now, I didn't even have permission to investigate Ian's death. I'd stepped off a porch into what appeared to be a puddle and fallen in over my head.

"His gift of beauty was as close to pure as we can determine," Custos said. "Our records only go back to the third century, but as far as I can tell, it was never split."

I tried to digest that. It would explain Ian's success as Laidir's court musician. The more a gift was split by a parent to two or more children the weaker it became. There were any number of people who were the recipient of a gift that had been split so often it conveyed almost no benefit whatsoever.

But pure? Since the war nine years prior I'd developed the habit of jumping to the worst conclusion, a habit that had kept me alive more than once. "Custos, where else are the records of the gifted kept?"

He blinked, his large brown eyes, looking at me as if I were a parchment written in some unknown tongue. "In Collum? Nowhere. The other orders haven't committed the scribes necessary to have the records copied."

Inside I went through every swear word I'd heard Jeb ever use, and then I started making up my own. "Who else has access to the records here?"

He shrugged. "We keep them locked up for protection, but any of the brothers or acolytes could retrieve the key."

I ran through Jeb's vocabulary again. It was now quite possible that whoever had killed Ian knew that I was looking for them. And

this innocent, strange, owlish man at my side with his incomprehensible mind was in danger now as well. I fought down the temptation to run out of the room with my sword in one hand and my dagger in the other, as if I could spot the killer or his allies. If the room where the records of the gifted were kept was being watched, we'd already been spotted.

I ran through the filmy chain of evidence in my head, trying to talk myself out of my conclusions, but I kept coming back to last night's wandering. My own peculiar brand of night-walking filled me with guilt and self-doubt, but in the nine years since the war, it had never failed me. The old man lying crumpled on the porch had been murdered. And according to a boy who had no reason or motivation to lie, the men who'd dumped him there had gone to some length to make themselves appear less than wealthy.

Within the truth that even a king's musician didn't earn anything close to the least of the city's nobles laid the motivation for the killing: power. "Custos, the priest at Ian's death said this was the second time this month one of the gifted had died. Who was the first?" I half-expected him to lead me to a different shelf, but I'd forgotten, again, that his ability to remember seemingly insignificant details far surpassed the rest of the human population.

"Lira Obair," Custos said without hesitation. He looked at me, and I saw his gaze, which perpetually wavered on the edge of unfocused, sharpen into something bright and cold. "Not pure, but close to it, my boy. She held a gift of craft." His hands, almost as delicate as a musician's, waved at me as he anticipated my next question. "She didn't live here in Bunard. We found out about it from the Merum priest in Slygo."

The craft gift was the broadest of the gifts Aer had sent and could manifest into any number of professions depending on its intersection with the talent and temperament of the wielder: ironsmith, alchemist, or jeweler among countless others. But the profession tended to shape the gift so if an alchemist bestowed the gift on another it often manifested in that way again. If it went free then it could become almost anything within the craft family once more. Priests referred to the circumstance as Aer's economy.

It wasn't the answer I'd expected and, relieved, I let my worst fear fall from me. Almost all of the heads of the noble families held a gift of craft. That was how they made and maintained their fortune. If my suspicion had been correct, there would be no need to steal another gift of the same kind. But there were a few noble families that held other gifts, and they'd been talented enough over the centuries to build a fortune with them.

I muttered a curse as I sifted through my flimsy logic, winnowing speculations from facts. There were too many things I didn't know. Custos's expression pulled the next question from me. "What was her profession?"

"She was an alchemist."

Lira had been killed too far from Bunard for me to have wandered that night, but perhaps I could get at the truth in a different way. "How did she die?"

"Stroke."

I took a deep breath. "How old was she?"

Custos blinked, and I imagined somewhere in his mind he pulled a book from a shelf to read the answer. "Thirty-eight."

My stomach lurched, my guts telling me that I'd dismissed my fear too soon. Old men and women died, but stroke or not, a son or daughter was usually there to receive the gift. Strokes in the middle-aged weren't unheard of, but too many coincidences piled up for my comfort. What benefit could a noble possibly obtain from stealing a charism of craft that had been imbued with the talent for alchemy? Only one of the three temptations presented itself. Power. And they weren't settling for half measures.

"Custos, what would happen if a man could assemble all the gifts?"

He blinked at me and licked his lips. "You sat in Master Orwin's class, my boy."

I didn't feel like confessing how often I'd slept through the dusty lectures that could turn the most dynamic parts of history into stale bread. Yet I remembered one topic that captivated me despite Master Orwin's monotone: the Gift Wars. More ballads and epics had been composed about the period than any other, and I'd listened

with rapt attention to the tales of men, physically and mentally gifted beyond others, wading through fields of blood as they tried to bring the continent together under their rule. Their quest for power stood out in lurid detail even in Orwin's dry monotone, the slaughter horrific enough to make the wars of the gift of kings that came centuries later look like a border skirmish.

"No one quite succeeded," Custos said, "but a few came close enough to fuel speculation." Then he leaned forward to tap the weathered book in my hands, the one filled with those few genealogies that had been given the right to rule. "There have been theologians throughout history—those who live and think on the fringe of orthodoxy—who believe the gift of the divine right of kings can be duplicated."

# Chapter 5

Like so many rooms in the Merum cathedral, the one containing the catalogs of the gifted had only one entrance. For a moment I reflected on how nice it would be to live an existence where back doors weren't needed or required. "Custos, I need two things. First, I need a list of noble families who don't have the gift of craft."

He ducked his head like an owl. "Done. It won't take more than a moment for me to write them down."

I waved a hand as he turned away. "Later. I've got to get you away from here for a while."

He looked at me, waiting for me to explain. I was tempted to write it down so he would read it and never forget it. "The people who killed Ian Kells got their information from this room."

His eyes widened, and he looked over each shoulder even though we'd closed the door behind us. "Foolish of me," he muttered, ducking his head. "Always looking for the facts without thinking about the consequences." He locked gazes with me, and the abstraction lifted from him for a moment. "You're right, of course, but what if they're watching now."

I nodded. "If they try to follow us, we'll have to lose them."

Custos brushed the spine of the nearest codex with the tips of his fingers. "I've never left the cathedral for any real length of time. Even my sleeping quarters are here. How long will we be gone?"

"Until I can unmask whoever is trying to duplicate the right of kings," I said. Out loud, it sounded as if I meant to take on Owmead's army single-handed, and I felt my stomach drop a bit closer to my legs. "We'll go out to the market as if I'm treating you

to more of those dates you love. Hopefully, that will allay any suspicion that we suspect we're being followed. If they think we're coming back, they might just stay here."

He nodded, but I didn't believe my words for a moment. I was dealing with a noble who was amassing gifts, and I could only think of one reason they'd want to: they meant to be king. Men who took those kinds of risks wouldn't countenance even a slight chance of discovery. I tried to think past the surging rhythm of my heart. They'd seen me. Even if they didn't know me, the reeve's badge I wore at my shoulder would make me easy to identify. Custos wasn't the only one who needed to hide.

"Let's go." I tried to nod confidently, but my head jerked as if I'd been blindsided. "Do what I tell you, and if I say run, go—and don't waste time looking back."

We left the room, and a few paces later I drew to a sudden stop to adjust my cloak. There were a dozen people in the room besides the two of us—too many for me to remember. I turned my back to them as if I'd forgotten something. "Custos, can you remember everyone who's in here?"

He blinked at me. "It doesn't work that way," he said with a smile. "It's more like I can't keep from it." His shoulders lifted a fraction and then settled back. "It's already done."

I couldn't decide whether to gape or smile, so I gave up. "Let's go to the market," I said out loud.

We worked our way through the visitors and acolytes toward the exit. None of them seemed to take any notice of us, but once we were outside on the flagstones, I dropped to one knee to adjust a boot. A moment later, an acolyte exited, his eyes sharp and searching.

"The hair," Custos muttered. He did a good job of fumbling in his robe for another date. I never saw him look toward the young man following us. "Niels cuts the hair of all the acolytes who come to us."

Niels had been old a decade ago. Even then his hands had been less than steady. None of the acolytes he barbered came out with such a neat cut. Those who came from nobility or wealth usually passed on the old man's particular form of charity. "Let's get to the

market in the lower merchants' section," I said. "We're just two men out for a stroll."

I was counting on the fact that the man following us wouldn't risk anything in public, but was hoping as well that whoever had killed Ian hadn't set more than one person to watching the library. I needed that well-groomed acolyte to follow us.

To get to the lower merchants' market we would have to walk the length of the nobles' quarter and the higher merchants' section as well. The expansive walls of the estates of the rich and powerful with their gatehouses and ironwork impressed, as always, but now they held an ominous feel as well. Behind the façade of well-manicured peace and prosperity lurked a man or woman who intended to duplicate the divine right of kings and seize the rule of the kingdom.

King Laidir had impressed me as a man burdened with the interest of his subjects, high or low. I didn't bother to speculate overly much on the nature of the one trying to replace him. Custos walked at my side as we crossed the arched bridge over one of the branches of the Rinwash. A funeral boat drifted under the corbeled arch, the body on its way to the sea far to the west. My theological training had erased most of my superstitions, but the hair on my arms lifted anyway. "It's hard not to see that as an omen."

"The church doesn't believe in omens," Custos said, but his words had the cadence of someone trying to convince themselves.

I dared a glance to see if our acolyte still trailed us. Twenty paces back a figure in white stood behind a cart, the hem of his robe visible beneath. "He's still there."

Custos bit his lip as if I'd given him bad news, and I reached out to give his shoulder a quick squeeze. "That's a good thing."

"I fail to see why having someone following who wants to kill us is to our advantage."

I checked the daggers I kept in my boot and behind my back. I had no desire to fight someone whose level of skill was unknown to me, but I might not have the choice. "Because he wouldn't have had time to report to anyone," I said.

Fifteen minutes later we came within sight of the next bridge, this one leading to the largest section of Bunard—the lower merchants' quarter. Here countless craftsmen, workers, wives, and children lived and plied their trade from their homes. "When we get to the market, we're going to make a quick turn down the second alley next to Braben's tavern," I said quietly. "Stay ahead of me." I knew the place and the owner well by virtue of my consistent patronage. On either side of Braben's, narrow winding alleys led from the market street to the river.

"Are you going to kill him?" Custos asked.

The job of a reeve sometimes called for violence, and I'd had a share, but it had been nine years and a battlefield since I'd had to plot how to kill a man. The worn leather hilt of my sword, molded to my hand by countless hours of sweat and heat, felt warm against my skin. Even if the fake acolyte following us had managed to hide a sword under his robe, it would be a simple matter to dispose of him.

Something fierce and dark woke in me at the thought, a hunger that scared me with its ferocity and seduction. I shook my head. "I hope not."

We walked past the front of Braben's and turned down the second alley. Ten paces in I wedged myself into a lip in the wall where the main building, made of wood, met the stone part of the tavern, which housed the kitchen. "Keep walking," I told Custos. He gave me a wide-eyed nod and continued down the alley. I focused on listening for the approach of the acolyte, and my sword whispered as I drew it from the sheath.

When his feet appeared, they were closer than I expected. I stepped from my hiding place. "Hold it right—"

I never finished. I had just enough time to shift the cross-guard of my sword to block a sweeping dagger thrust. Metal clanged against metal, and my attacker stepped in closer. I couldn't maneuver. His blade came for my middle while our free hands grappled.

I couldn't parry. I dropped my sword and jerked to my right, the thrust glancing off my jerkin. Fire cut my side as I caught his wrist, but I'd failed to surprise my attacker and I had no weapon.

I'd trained in close quarters in the last war. *"Surprise and speed,"* my instructor had screamed at me day after day.

The acolyte pushed against me. Instead of resisting, I pulled with him, twisting so that I landed on him as we fell. I brought my elbow up into his face. Blood burst from his nose, and I saw his eyes widen in surprise and pain before going dark with anger.

His other hand darted for his robe, groping.

My boots scrabbled against the ground as I shoved, rolling his weight onto that arm. His knee found my groin and breath exploded from me. I clenched my knees together and head-butted him on his broken nose.

But the move shifted my balance, and he threw me off to the side, drawing a second dagger. I rolled, searching for my sword.

I saw my blade behind him and growled my frustration. Pulling the dagger strapped to the inside of my boot, I darted forward. Suicide. One dagger against two. I worked to his left and saw him smile beneath the ruin of his nose.

Left-handed.

And he'd tried to hide it.

I ripped my cloak from my neck and spun it around my left arm as he closed.

I thrust my left arm at his face and dropped. Kicking as hard as I could, I swept his feet. His dagger stroke went just over my head, and I saw his eyes widen as he fell.

Switching my grip for an overhand thrust, I leaped toward him for the kill, but he kicked out even before he hit the ground, one boot taking me in the knee and the other hitting my wrist. I watched as my dagger sailed away. I staggered, struggling for balance.

By the time I'd righted myself, he'd rolled back to his feet and came at me again.

I took a thrust that sank through most of my cloak, but he wrapped a leg behind mine, pushing. I fell to the stones of the alley with his weight on me.

Pinned with the point of his dagger against my chest, I locked my hands around his wrist, struggling to keep it from me.

I couldn’t get any leverage. His weight kept my arms pinned at my sides. A smile split his face as the tip inched closer. I could have put my thumb through his eye, but the moment I let go with either hand, I’d have eight inches of steel in me.

The heat of his breath washed over me as the tip of his dagger pushed against my jerkin. Any second the thick leather would give way, and then the blade would slip right through me.

I slammed my knees into his body, trying to make contact with something sensitive. He smiled at the weak blows, and the pressure on my jerkin increased. Somewhere in my mind I whispered the prayer for the dead. For myself.

The pressure eased. I blinked, saw my attacker staring through me, trying to focus. Then the flat of my sword blade swept down, hitting him again. Custos.

My attacker shook his head, trying to clear it, and the blade lifted from my chest. I shifted, extended my arms, and turned his wrist until something popped.

I covered his mouth as he drew breath to scream, grabbed his dagger and put it through his heart. The look of victory that had been in his eyes turned to shock as he looked down. By the time he fell to the side, he was already dead.

Custos stood over me and the dead man, holding my sword like a club, ready to strike again. “Is he dead?”

The abstraction I always felt in the presence of death came over me again. I brushed dark hair back from his forehead as I turned his face toward me and caught a hint of reflection off a glassy stare. The eyes. The gaze of the dead man captivated me, looking through me, focused on something so impossibly far away only eternity could comprehend it. “Tell me,” I whispered to him. “What do you see?”

“Willet?” Custos said in a voice that could have come from the next kingdom. “Is he dead?”

I blinked, the trance broken. My attacker, like all the others who’d died in my presence, hadn’t answered. “Yes, old friend. He’s dead.”

“It’s a shame you killed him,” Custos said. He flopped on the ground next to me, breathing heavily, sharing my exhaustion. “You could have questioned him.”

I shook my head. “Too dangerous for that one. I don’t think I could have gotten anything out of him that he didn’t already tell me.”

Custos’s eyebrows, the only part of him that hadn’t gone gray, rose in surprise. “He spoke to you?”

I shook my head. “Not in words, but when we were fighting, I moved to attack from his left. He smiled.” I nudged the dead man with my boot. “Now why would somebody left-handed try to hide it?”

It took Custos a moment to arrive at the same conclusion I had, but he got there just the same. “Family trait?” His eyes widened. “Orlan.”

I nodded as I shifted to stand. The second most powerful family in Collum had a preponderance of left-handed men in the line, a fact they’d used to their advantage in the clan wars in centuries long past. The spiral stairways in their keeps wound the opposite way from all the others, giving their defenders more room to maneuver.

I knew the history of Collum well enough to know it had been the Orlan family that had lost the gift of kings to Laidir’s ancestor, but why would a family that already owned a pure gift of craft take the risk of stealing something they already had?

The thought of pursuing an investigation into the Orlan family—to say nothing about the fact that I, a commoner, had just killed one of them—added several layers to my exhaustion. I could have slept for a week, but I clawed my way to a standing position and dragged the dead man into the shadows so no one would stumble upon it. “Let’s go inside. Braben is a friend. I’m sure he has a cellar where we can search the body.”

# Chapter 6

The clothes of the dead acolyte revealed nothing to confirm my suspicions, and I promised Braben three silvers I didn't have to hide the body and Custos for a few days. There weren't many of the gifted in the lower merchants' section, but Braben had decided long ago that he preferred the company of more ordinary people. He could have run a tavern two or three times the size in the upper merchants' portion of the city and amassed a fortune, but in addition to a partial gift of helps, Braben possessed a love for simple things and plain-spoken people. Thankfully, that included me.

In his tavern the fire was lit, the food was good, and his family surrounded their patrons with tales and laughter. Walking into his inn for most of his customers was like walking into a second home. For me it was like walking into my first.

I put the thought aside, holding my hopeful return to Braben's in the near future as a reward for exposing the plot against Laidir. The sun touched the tops of the peaks to the west as I trudged my way uphill back to the king's tor. My shift had officially ended two hours ago. Most of my acquaintances within the city watch would be drifting toward mugs of ale and games of bones.

The nobles, along with the gifted brought to entertain them, would gather in Laidir's court to eat and dance. Every member of the Orlan family present within the city would be there. I needed to find the man or woman who thought to make themselves ruler. Ealdor, bless him and his rundown church, had hinted at the means to do just that.

The guardroom at the base of the tor had already emptied of everyone except the prison shift for that evening and Jeb. Even standing alone, he clothed himself with the threat of violence like a cloak against the cold, though he seldom used it. The threat was more than enough.

When he saw me he laughed with the closest approximation to humor he possessed. “By my hope of heaven, Dura, you look awful.”

I’d been too busy appreciating my survival to take note of my appearance. Ordinarily, I would have joined in the jest, but something in my face or demeanor must have warned him, because I saw him clench and unclench his fists.

“I don’t like that look, Dura,” he growled at me. “It says you’ve got a problem and you feel like you need to share it. I don’t think I’m going to enjoy hearing how you got messed up as much as I thought at first.” The rumble in his throat deepened. “Go away.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, sir,” I said. I hoped he could sense the genuine sentiment behind that. Even at the onset of the night shift, there were still too many sets of ears in the guardroom for my comfort. “But I can’t. I need to speak with you in private.”

A vein jumped in his forehead. “If you’re wasting my time, I’m going to make you regret it.”

“I already do.” Something in my answer must have mollified him, because he turned away from me toward the niche that served as his office carved into the rock at one side of the guardroom.

He closed the massive door behind me but didn’t bother to sit or invite me to. I didn’t mind. I’d been in there before, and the three chairs that accompanied the simple table had been selected for their lack of comfort. Jeb didn’t enjoy others’ company. “Say it quickly,” he ordered.

“Someone’s trying to duplicate King Laidir’s gift, sir. One of the Merum acolytes followed me from their cathedral and tried to put a knife through my ribs.” I paused, waiting for him to answer his own objections before I spoke again. “He tracked me to Braben’s before attacking me in the alley. He almost had me when I made the mistake of thinking he was right-handed.”

It took a couple of seconds before Jeb caught the unspoken accusation. When he did, I heard his knuckles pop. "You're *gnath*, Dura. You don't even have a partial gift. If you bring an accusation against the nobility without proof, you end up tied to a post and beaten for it."

Some of the nobles in Laidir's court treated commoners almost as equals. The Orlan family didn't fit in that category. They regarded any one of common birth as less than human. "I can tell the castellan."

Jeb looked at me as if I'd gone insane. "If your accusation is correct, you'll be dead in less than a day. Castellan Baelwer is cousin to Duke Orlan and the price Laidir had to pay in order to secure the duke's support in the last war." He shook his head. "If you want to prove your charge, you're going to have to do it without the help of any of the nobles."

"What if we went directly to the king?"

Jeb shook his head as if he were talking to a simpleton. "You can't get to the king. Everything goes through the castellan. The guards to the doors of the court are under orders not to let anyone enter who isn't a noble or on the castellan's pre-approved list."

If I had any hope of warning the king, I'd have to enlist Jeb's aid for my desperate idea. "I could become a servant."

Jeb looked at me, his face a mask devoid of reaction for all of two heartbeats. Then he gave a slow nod. "It's possible, but that still won't get you to the king. He has his own private staff."

I quoted Ealdor. "Servants are invisible. If I can get close enough to the Orlan family, I might be able to see or hear something I can use to figure out which of them is plotting against Laidir. Then I can work my way close enough to the king to warn him."

Jeb snorted his disgust. "That's as thin as a Merum wafer, Dura. You've been listening to too many tales. Laidir's court is a nest of vipers. Nobles don't make stupid mistakes like that."

I'd heard the description of court my whole life, a magical place filled with light and laughter and music, peopled by greed and ambition. Any sane man would run the other way, and here I stood arguing for the chance to put my life in danger.

Obviously, I wasn't as smart as I'd thought.

Jeb worked his way around the table to the door. "I'll give you an introduction to the chamberlain. He's a friend of mine."

That last shocked me and it must have showed on my face. "I do have friends, Dura," Jeb said with a roll of his shoulders. "A few anyway. The war and this job have taught me to be cautious."

Inside I nodded my agreement. The myriad lessons of war ran deep in the kingdom and through the men and women that survived it.

An hour later I was dressed in servant's livery, black hose covered by a long blue tunic and topped by a red vest. It hurt my eyes to look at it. I still had my boots, and I bent to check the knife strapped to the inside of the right one. Its presence comforted and frightened me at the same time. If I drew it in anger in the presence of the nobles, they'd kill me on the spot.

The chamberlain, a man almost as big as Jeb and as threatening in his own way drew close. "Jeb saved my life, but if you bring me any unwanted attention from the king, I'll make sure you suffer for it ten times over."

I nodded. "What do I need to know?"

The chamberlain laughed at me, a discomforting bark that sounded like rocks crashing together. "Have you ever been in court before?"

I shook my head.

"There's only one rule for the servants, Dura. Bring them food and drink and do whatever they tell you. The new servants start with wine—it's simplest. For heaven's sake and your own, don't spill anything on them or they'll beat you black." His smile mocked me. "Try not to get distracted."

I walked into court with a flagon of wine cradled in my hands. To my left at the far end of court on a raised dais, Laidir sat on his

throne, flanked by Queen Cailin and their son. My king and queen looked bored or abstracted, I couldn't tell which, but Prince Brod, hardly more than two or three years of age, watched the panoply of court in wide-eyed wonder, chewing on a chubby fist.

If I failed to prevent Laidir's murder, Cailin and Brod were unlikely to survive him. Something, steps or nerves, sent ripples across the wine I carried like a stone dropped into the center of a pond. The chamberlain hadn't warned me about the room itself. High arched windows of stained glass lined the long broad hall with scenes of unsurpassed beauty depicting war and love. Between the buttresses that supported the roof, entertainers vied for the attention of bored nobles. Singers declaimed tales of love and heartbreak in soaring tones that could shatter glass, if not the hearts of the nobles they sang to.

In one broad alcove a juggler in garish colors managed to keep seven daggers aloft while balancing on a ball atop elevated blocks of wood. I stared in wonder, transfixed, as he managed to keep the ball from slipping off the ridiculously small topmost block without the appearance of effort. With a flourish, he leapt from the ball, toward the weave of daggers, which seemed to vanish in midair and landed neatly on the ground with a casual brush at his sleeve. He bowed to negligent applause, then gathered his ball and turned to mount his makeshift tower once more.

I shook my head in amazement at the intersection of the juggler's gift of beauty and talent of motion. I'd never seen anything to compare to it, but the intersection of gift and talent most on display belonged to the musicians. The most accomplished in the kingdom—those like Ian, whose gifts were pure or almost so—played a variety of instruments, their fingers a blur across the strings of the lute or mandolin or flute, each played deftly, merging their music with the melody around them.

I'd never heard any sound so beautiful in my life, and I wanted to weep with it.

In the center of the hall, two concentric rings of nobles danced, women in the center ring rotating in the opposite direction of the men in the outer ring. Scattered around them stood clusters of other

nobles in groups of four or more, their expressions betraying the content of their speech.

In that moment, surrounded by the scents and sights and sounds of more beauty than I'd ever witnessed, the nobles made me aware of my danger. Not one among the hundreds assembled there in the giant hall offered any recognition or acknowledgement of the mastery on display for their benefit. Their gazes remained fixed upon the other nobles, either dancing or speaking, or the king himself, who sat an ornate throne on the raised dais at the far end of the hall.

Like eels waiting to strike.

I circulated with my flagon, refilling the goblets of those who held them out to me, and searched for the Orlan family.

A voice accompanied by the sound of fingernails tapping against the rim of a glass interrupted my search. "Here, please."

The tones were slightly deeper than most women owned, but all the more beautiful for the caress of sound they laid upon my ear. I turned with my flagon already raised, and found myself face-to-face with her.

Many women were fair, their features attractive in the current fashion, which celebrated daintiness instead of strength. Lady Gael, a woman I'd noticed from afar any number of times, would never be one of those. Her nose was slightly too large for current tastes, but I saw harmony between it and the curve of her jawline that age would never diminish. Too tall for most men, her eyebrows, dark above eyes of a cerulean blue, hinted at insights available only to the mind behind them, and I stole a moment to wonder at the thoughts she reserved for herself alone.

I bowed my apologies for my inattention, ducking my head so that I wouldn't be caught staring at her lips, full and expressive, that had a way of shaping speech where others merely spoke it.

"Your pardon, lady," I murmured.

"For what, good servant?" she laughed. "I would expect no man to anticipate my desires."

"Then that is every man's loss," I said without thinking.

A woman at her side laughed. “Servants are rarely so glib.” She stepped forward and patted me on the arm. “Nicely spoken.” She made a show of looking me over until my face matched the vest I wore. “Let us play our game with this one, sister. Tell me what you see.”

Lady Gael’s lips curved with pleasure even as she shook her head. “Give me a moment, Kera.” She spared a glance for me before she lifted her shoulders. “He’s obviously ordinary.”

I straightened, looking back and forth between the two women, desperate to keep my gaze from lingering on Lady Gael. No reason existed to take offense at the opinion of one raised in wealth and comfort. “It would be sinful to deny what is evident, my lady. My features serve me well enough, plain though they may be.”

Kera laughed, and I noted it held the same richness of tone as Lady Gael’s. Their features were akin, but while Gael’s blue eyes were topped by dark hair, Kera’s green eyes were surmounted by burnished auburn.

Gael smiled at me and I noted the curve of her lips in spite of my efforts not to. “He’s quick, this one,” she said. “But I do not refer to your appearance, but to your birth. Very well, sister, I accept. The usual wager?”

Kera nodded. “Agreed.”

Gael’s hand lifted, commanding me to remain. I noted it held the same feminine strength as her face. “Be still.” Her gaze fastened to my boots and she walked a slow circle around me. “He’s new to the court.”

“Come now, sister,” Kera said. “I knew that much by the way he clutched the wine flagon. His knuckles are stark against the back of his hand.”

I didn’t know what game they played, but I couldn’t afford the distraction or the possibility of unwanted attention. Servants were supposed to be invisible. “Your ladies, if you will excuse me, I should be about my duties.”

“No,” Gael said, her voice soft as she continued to step around me. “We do not excuse you.”

“Not until we’ve satisfied our wager,” Kera added.

"Wager?" I asked.

She nodded. "Gael must be able to divine something from your appearance that I cannot." Her lips curved into a bow. "We rarely get to play anymore. All the nobles are too familiar, and the servants offer too little challenge."

Gael stepped around me, a horse at auction being checked for defects before the bargaining started. A moment later she stepped back, her gaze now up to the level of my head. I found reasons not to meet her stare.

"Interesting," she noted. "He doesn't want to play."

Kera chuckled. "Few of them do, sister. They've been trained to be deferential, after all."

Gael shook her head. "His deference rests upon him like an ill-fitting cloak. I think his reasons are different." She completed her circle until she stood next to her sister once more. "Look up, please—first at me and then at my sister," Gael ordered.

I held her gaze as long as I dared, breaking it before looking at her sister.

Kera drew a breath. "Very well, sister, what do you see?"

Gael pulled air into her lungs, and I admired the stained glass for the second time that evening. "Common, but the dagger in his boot says something. The servant's outfit indicates that he's very new to the hall, perhaps added only this evening. The fact that it fits him poorly might be evidence that he's a last-minute addition."

Kera nodded with impatience. "Yes, all of that is obvious."

Gael's head tilted in thought. "There are fresh cuts and bruises on his hands. He's been brawling, but he doesn't carry himself in the manner of a soldier, not quite. Yet his right hand has the calluses you'd expect from one."

Gael's sister looked skyward. "You're stalling."

Gael smiled. "How do I know what you've noted or missed unless I go through it all?"

Kera's laugh sounded clean and joyful. "When was the last time I missed anything so obvious?" Her eyes narrowed as she brought her gaze to mine. "If you desire my coin, sister, you'll have to unravel the mystery above the shoulders."

Gael's answering smile held equal parts challenge and determination within it. "The face is more weathered than most—he's outdoors quite a bit."

"He's young," Kera said in a prodding tone.

Gael nodded. "The mouth is unlined, but the creases between his brows are deep enough to be a permanent fixture. He's either a man of thoughts . . ."

" . . . or a man gripped by some concern," Kera finished.

I shouldn't have met her gaze, but their inspection grated, and the willingness to adopt the servant's pose deserted me.

"There's steel in this one," Gael said. "He hasn't been a servant long." Her gaze bored into mine. "Secrets."

Kera's breath ghosted from her in a small laugh. "Every man has secrets. It's one of the few things that make taming them worthwhile."

Gael's face went slack as her stare continued. Sudden realization of my danger exploded in my mind. Nearly all nobles were gifted in some way. I had no idea how Lady Gael's giftedness and innate talent might have intersected. What could they divine by mere inspection? I didn't know and, more importantly, I couldn't afford to find out.

A stir behind me gave me all the excuse I needed to interrupt their game. Striding into the hall as if he owned it, came a man of more than average height with the strong features and bearing sculptors liked to use when they crafted statues of those who walked a little closer to Aer than most men. It took me a moment to realize he walked a pace to the left and one more ahead of another man, alike in features, but half-a-hand shorter and without such rigid arrogance. Several other men and women, bearing the same stamp upon their countenance came with them.

Kera pursed her lips. "Now there is a man well-featured enough to make the angels weep."

"Orlan is striking and beautiful," Gael agreed softly.

My gaze snapped to the two men surrounded now by a cadre of nobles as if a standing version of a king's court had been called, sycophants drinking in his every word, as if they had been given by

divine inspiration. Inside my heart quailed. The Orlan family boasted no small number of kin. How could I possibly determine which of them plotted against my king?

At the risk of prolonging their game, I bowed to Ladies Gael and Kera. "I see several men within the circle, my lady, which do you mean?"

Gael and Kera both laughed as if I'd asked after the color of the sky, but behind their laughter I saw them add my question to the tally of evidence they weighed upon their scales.

Their gazes went through me as though I'd become as glass, but a moment later Gael answered. "Duke Orlan, of course, good servant." She nodded toward the group over her wine goblet. "He stands half a hand taller than any of his kin, and he carries himself like a king."

The instincts I'd honed for years reading people in the poor quarter came into focus, noting the way the duke moved, each motion a deliberate calculation to convey power at rest, an unshakeable confidence that accepted the presence of others but in no way required it.

"Such a striking man would hardly make for a good husband," I muttered as I noted the artful gestures, but inside I plotted how to approach the group.

I shouldn't have spoken aloud. "Do you play the game?" Gael asked.

I turned, found Gael and her sister staring at me. "A change in the wager, sister," Kera said. "The servant's first observation of the duke will be at least as good as yours was."

"Done." Gael smiled. She turned to me. "Tell us what you see."

I shook my head. "It is not for a servant to weigh his betters on the scales, my lady."

"Oh no, master servant," she said with a hint of steel in her smile. "It is for servants to do as bid." She stepped closer and her voice lowered as those striking blue eyes darkened from a sky at dusk to slate. "Tell us everything you see or my sister and I will expose you. You are no servant, and spies in the king's court are frowned upon."

She might have been bluffing, but I couldn't chance it. "Very well." I turned. The duke's group had drifted closer to us to stand no more than a dozen paces away. "The duke stands to one side, with most of his back to the king allowing him to command nearly as large an audience without appearing disrespectful. Watch as he speaks, each motion of his hands designed to embellish his words. Even the cuffs of his sleeves, a fraction of an inch longer than normal, serve to accentuate his words. He stands at ease, a man who appears to care nothing for the opinion of lesser nobles who surround him. Yet observe how his eyes move quickly to each respondent, his expression carefully neutral, sifting their words for some insult.

"Such men in their prime are much concerned with surrounding themselves by those as beautiful, but they are jealous of their primacy. When their beauty fades they become embittered."

There was more, but I stopped. The duke's sword worried me. The scabbard holding it held all the useless decoration one might expect from a noble fixed upon appearances, but the plain hilt showed a deadly serious side to the duke.

Kera laughed, spilling her wine. "Do you yield, sister?"

I knelt to wipe the floor clean and rose to refill her goblet. I emptied my flagon into the rose-colored glass, keeping my gaze averted from them both. I rose as Lady Gael deposited more silver into her sister's hand on a casual wager than I would earn in half a year.

"You misjudge in your presumption, servant," Lady Gael said, turning to me. Steel crept into her voice and eyes, and fool that I was I could only think of how it enhanced her features, as if a veil had been removed. "I would never look upon the duke as a potential suitor." Her gaze sharpened until it could have parted silk. "My family is liege to his. He has nothing to gain through such a marriage."

I took an involuntary step backward. If Lady Gael or her sister repeated my assessment of the duke to him, I would be fortunate to escape with a striping.

Gael closed the space between us, her smile one of victory despite the wager she'd lost. "Your perception is nearly keen enough to be gifted and the practice of deferential obedience is not on you," she

whispered, her eyes darting over my shoulder. “By the time a servant is admitted to the throne room, they have practiced their subservience until they wear it like a second skin they can scarcely remove, more’s the pity.” She turned to her sister. “He is at work for the castellan,” she said in tones that barely reached my ears.

Kera eyed me with renewed interest, her smile growing as she returned Gael’s silver. “Well played, sister.”

# Chapter 7

Their conclusion stood too close to the truth. Without waiting for dismissal I turned, hoping to serve the duke and his kinsmen before Gael and Kera exposed me. I should have looked behind me first. Before I'd taken my first step, I crashed into a tall figure dressed all in red. The flagon tumbled from my hands to crash on the floor, threading dissonance through the strains of music in the hall.

"Watch where you're going, fool!"

I bent to pick up the flagon, scarcely taking it in my grip before hands hauled me up to face the man I'd bumped. "Your Grace, here is sport," the man called to the duke. "This servant presumes to judge your character."

A hole opened in my midsection, and most of my guts disappeared into it. I *was* a fool, allowing myself to speak my mind out loud, and in the throne room of all places.

For a moment, Duke Orlan appeared on the verge of approaching where I stood, but he cut his eyes toward his audience and with a practiced gesture summoned his man and me to approach. I looked into a smile that only emphasized the absence of compassion or empathy in his eyes. His perfect face might have been carved from marble for all the warmth or humanity it possessed.

"Someone has been lax in your training. Consider yourself fortunate that you've caught my notice." He nodded to his man. "Release him." He clucked his disapproval at the noble I'd backed into. "Wine stains on a perfectly good doublet."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Gael and Kera go pale. "Your Grace," Gael said as she curtsied. "I found myself amused by this

servant's presumption." To her credit, the laugh she assayed held all the mockery and derision one would expect from a noble. "I'm afraid our conversation startled him into bumping into your man." She turned to me. "You are dismissed, servant."

Orlan offered her a condescending smile for her effort. "Still playing your game, ladies? Servants are paid to be invisible."

"Come, brother," the man on Orlan's right said. "The servant can hardly be held to account for their wager."

Gael nodded, grasping at the opportunity. "Yes. His limited intelligence offered a moment's diversion from the tedium of court."

I cowered as any servant would have—fear of the duke's reprisal made the effort genuine enough—but my gaze flew everywhere at once, searching the duke's group for anyone who might have stolen Ian's gift. But they all stood still, a rapt audience for the duke's spectacle.

I bowed my thanks to the Lady Gael for covering my indiscretion, but inside I railed. Once the chamberlain learned of my blunder he would never allow me back into court. I turned to leave.

"Hold!" The duke's voice, threaded with cold amusement, stopped me. "*I* have not dismissed you, servant." Around him, I heard titters of laughter at my predicament. More nobles gathered until we were ringed about, but none of them betrayed by motion or expression any indication that they held an unlawful gift.

The duke cast a sneer toward his brother. "You are too forgiving, brother." He sighed. "Such a disappointment. Yet I suppose your soft nature is becoming to the second born, a mere marquis." His smirk encompassed a rapt audience. "Perhaps a gift of helps has come to you unaware?" More laughter greeted this jibe, but the duke's brother merely dipped his head in acknowledgment, the gesture of a man so familiar with disdain that it no longer carried the power to sting.

The duke turned his smile to me. "Servant, my goblet is empty." The duke held it out to me with his left hand. Gael flinched, her arm reaching toward me as if she could prevent what would surely come next, but the duke reveled in his element, his eyes wide, intoxicated by the exercise of his power. When I stepped toward him, the empty

flagon lifted as if I could honor his request, Orlan flicked his eyes toward the man on my left.

Every boy from the lowest commoner to the most exalted noble knew what would happen next: Orlan's subordinate would trip me, causing me to fall into the duke, who would then use my perceived assault as cause to beat me.

I kept my eyes on the duke, biting my lip. What I intended to do frightened me enough to send palsied tremors through my hands. Dear Aer, I hoped to live through it.

Orlan's man didn't use half measures. His boot shot out, catching me in the shin hard enough to send me sprawling had I not expected it. I turned the leg to catch the kick on the meat of my calf.

Even so the blow felt as if it might have cracked the bone. I screamed to keep every eye fastened on my humiliation and launched the empty flagon toward the duke and his brother.

The flagon flew toward the duke and his brother, and I twisted midfall to watch it. The impact jarred my vision, but I saw the handle of the flagon nestle in the duke's hand almost by magic. He stood, regarding me with contempt, holding the empty pitcher as if I'd handed it to him.

In the background I heard the music grind to a halt with a cacophonous fall of notes accompanied by the clatter of daggers hitting the floor from the juggler's direction.

I jerked my head away and closed my eyes, hiding my revelation. The duke's family, like most nobles, boasted the gift of craft. Their fortune had been built on the exercise of it and the ruthlessness that comes with a hunger for dominion. But that gift had never enabled any of its holders to do what I had just witnessed. Only a physical gift of beauty could do that, whether Ian's or another's.

"Would you mind refilling my cup?" the duke's brother asked, proffering his goblet.

The duke's face heated at the titters that swept the crowd, and he dropped the flagon to the floor, the clatter loud against the stones. His men pulled me up by my hair as the chamberlain rushed up, his face mottled with anger and shame. "Your Grace"—he bowed

—"please forgive this lapse. I will ensure that this man is never in your presence again."

The duke laughed, and I breathed a sigh of relief even while I braced myself for what would come next. I locked what I'd seen away behind my eyes and kept my gaze upon the floor even as I reeled at its revelation.

"On the contrary," Duke Orlan said. "I insist that this servant be present in the throne room whenever I am." He sighed in mock regret. "In a different time I could have had him killed for his ineptitude." Orlan glanced toward the throne where Laidir looked on. "A pity those days are long behind us. In the absence of example, training will have to suffice."

His voice dipped into a lower register. "You seemed to have dropped your flagon, servant. You may pick it up now."

"Your Grace," Gael said, "please allow me to administer his chastisement."

Orlan smiled at her attempt to intervene. "You are much too tender-hearted, my lady. Sometimes a firm hand is what is required." He turned to the man I'd bumped. "Skerrit, I leave his correction in your hands."

The duke's man grinned, holding an almost childlike joy at the opportunity to exercise his cruelty. He pulled a riding crop from within his tunic, slapping it across his palm. "Retrieve your wares, servant."

I bent to pick up the flagon at Orlan's feet. The crack of impact reached my ears just before fire exploded across my back. For a moment of brief insanity I tried to clench my teeth around the pain, but the second and third stroke came so quickly that screams tore themselves from my throat. Spots swam in my vision and a warm flow of blood began to soak my tunic.

I wondered absurdly if I should let myself pass out to put my back out of reach.

"Halt!" A voice from the dais demanded. I tried to turn to see the speaker, but tremors of pain deprived my muscles of the ability to obey. Obeisant mutters surrounded us as I fought to control my

shaking and gasps. I gave up and rolled on the floor, striving to see my intercessor, but too many bodies blocked my vision.

The duke's man dropped the crop to the floor as an official in blue livery, the castellan, approached. A goblet dangled loosely within his left hand, his nose a copy of the duke's. "No more than three stripes, cousin," he said, his gaze cutting to the throne, "by order of the king."

Skerrit laughed. "He'll remember those few, I warrant."

The chamberlain knelt by me and a hand that could have doubled as a vise hauled me to my feet and rushed me from the duke's presence. "You're lucky I don't have you flogged myself."

"I don't feel very lucky." Blood had already started to glue the fabric of the servant's tunic to my back. Whenever I worked up the courage to get undressed, I'd relive the beating.

But I'd found the man responsible for Ian's death. Beneath my bloody strokes, I exulted even as astonishment threaded its way through my realization.

We departed the throne room by the servants' entrance on the side, between two of the buttresses adorned with a pair of statues of long-dead kings on either side. In the servants' hall just off the kitchens, the chamberlain spun me around, throwing me into a chair. My wounds hit the oak ladder backing and I gasped, my vision narrowing to a point.

"You will present yourself to me at dawn tomorrow morning." His tone matched his face, thunderous and on the edge of explosion. "By the time court reconvenes at nightfall you will be a model servant. If you thought the duke's correction harsh, you've no idea what I can mete out."

He tugged at his own tunic and vest, embroidered in silver, a far richer version of what the servants wore. "Now, get out of here. And let those stripes remind you of the price of your stupidity."

I left by the opposite door from the one we'd entered. I had no desire to bring myself within reach of Duke Orlan or his men. I'd watched the flight of the flagon. Did he suspect I knew?

A deep breath broke that train of thought as fire lanced across my back. It would probably take several feet of thread to sew the flesh

together, and the nearest healer I knew lived close to Braben's tavern. The thought of making the trek down the height of Laidir's tor brought a groan to my lips, but it couldn't be helped.

After I got myself stitched together, I would have to figure out how to go about exposing the duke and be back at court so Orlan could continue my training. That I wouldn't show for the chamberlain was a foregone conclusion. I tried not to think about the consequences of my disobedience.

I stumbled into the hallway off the servant's room and startled when two armed men stepped in place on either side of me. Both of them topped me by a hand, one with hair the color of fire and the other with a mane so blond it was almost white. They didn't say anything until I came to the turn leading to the steps that descended to the lower levels of the tor.

"The other way," the red-haired guard said.

A dagger against a pair of very big swords didn't seem like a gamble I could win. "Where are we going?"

The guards didn't bother to answer. Instead they led me along a twisting series of turns that seemed designed to make me lose my sense of direction. I'd heard tales of the maze of Laidir's tor my whole life, but only now did I appreciate them.

We came to a pair of heavy double doors flanked by two more guards as big as the pair that escorted me. Without a word, the one on the right poked his head inside, then waved the three of us in.

I blinked against sudden brightness, then gaped. Laidir stood on a shallow dais ten paces away, looking somber and expectant. Without thought, I dropped to my knees, gasping as one of Orlan's stripes opened. Fresh warmth seeped down my back.

"Rise," Laidir said, the voice the same as the one that had stopped my beating.

I stood, keeping my gaze to the rich red carpet on the floor.

"I find it easier to judge the truth of a man's words if I can see his face," Laidir said. "Look at me."

I lifted my head, and for the first time in my life I gazed upon the divine right of kings in the flesh. I'd heard men talk of presence before, and I'd felt it in some measure among the mighty in the last

war, but Laidir possessed something at once more grand and more indefinable. He granted me a moment to gaze around his private chambers, and I marveled at the collection of tools and instruments that filled the tables. The organization appealed to the eyes as if a complex piece of music had been set to sight instead of sound. Books lined the shelves behind the tables, more than I'd ever seen a single individual possess. I squinted at the nearest, and the titles added to my surprise—most of them were collections of tales.

"Are you surprised?"

I had no training to guide me in my answer. The king laughed at my mute stare. "There is as much instruction in tales as there is in history or theology." He smiled. "And I enjoy it." A measure of joy dropped from him. "Now, why would one of my reeves pretend to be a servant?"

I couldn't have kept the surprise from my face if I tried. "Your Majesty knows who I am?"

His expression hardened, though it didn't seem to be directed at me. "How long would I live if I allowed strangers to come into my presence, Willet Dura?" He leaned forward. "What was so important that you had to throw a flagon at one of my most powerful nobles?"

"The duke's man tripped me," I said.

Laidir shook his head, and the beginnings of anger flashed behind his eyes though it had yet to show on his face. "You expected the blow. I saw you turn to take it off the bone. Do not dissemble with me, reeve. Some would construe your actions as an attack on the duke."

I'd heard men speak of Laidir's air, of the effect of being close to one ordained by Aer to hold the power of life and death over a nation. "I fell and the flagon flew from my hands."

The king gave me a slight smile. "Toward the duke and the marquis from a mere pace away. That's quite a coincidence. You're fortunate it was empty." Hazel eyes stared through me as if I were a shadow man made of gossamer.

"Your Majesty, he caught it."

"Stop," Laidir commanded, leaning forward until he could have touched me. "What exactly did you see?" he asked, as if his words

had the power of compulsion.

"Something that shouldn't have been possible," I said. "The duke caught the flagon by the handle, which was facing away from him."

The king waved away my concern, but his gaze remained intent. "Come now, master reeve, the Orlan family are all excellent swordsmen even if they do not hold a physical gift. The talent for motion runs deep in their family. Is this the extent of your concern?"

I shook my head. "No, sire. The duke took the flagon out of midair in his right hand while holding his goblet with his left."

Laidir shrugged as if I'd yet to convince him. "Too many bodies blocked my view and your own perceptions might be skewed." He assayed a brief smile. "You appeared to be busy falling to the floor at the time. Is this why you came to court?"

I took a deep breath and accepted the burden of the accusation I intended to bring. "Your Majesty, two gifts have gone free in the last month—one of craft within the Orlan province and one of beauty in your city. Can an ungifted man move faster than the eye, Your Majesty?"

The king's mouth pulled to one side, and he turned away from me to look out the window. "Are you sure, Reeve Dura?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes, Your Majesty."

The smile dropped from him as he turned to face me again and his gaze bored into mine. "You had just taken a blow that must have caused you considerable pain and you were in the midst of falling. Are you certain, Reeve Dura?"

I nodded, but doubt wormed its way into my memory. Was I?

"The duke is not known for his gentle treatment of servants," Laidir said. "Were you frightened?"

I swallowed. "Aye, Your Majesty."

He nodded. "And yet, frightened, struck, and in the midst of falling, you tell me that you are certain enough of what you saw that you wish to accuse the most powerful duke in Collum with gift stealing?"

I gaped, blinking, not knowing how to respond.

Then he smiled. "You see how untrustworthy memory is, Reeve Dura? In a matter of minutes, armed with no more than the right to

examine you and with a mere three questions, I've caused you to doubt your version of events that took place no more than minutes ago."

"Duke Orlan is trying to duplicate the gift of kings, which is yours by divine right."

"Divine right, you say? Those are old beliefs for an older time, before the northern continent tore itself apart in the wars of the gifted, before those who held those rights committed themselves to slaughter as completely as the would-be usurpers."

"But the gift came to you free," I said. "In the tradition of the church and all its orders, that signifies that Aer intended you to have it."

His brows lifted. "I doubt that the Orlan family would see it that way since it came from their family. Your speech is more becoming of a priest than a reeve, Willet Dura."

The old longing washed over me again, like the pain of emptiness that surpassed hunger. "I missed my orders by a week, Your Majesty, called to serve you in the last war against Owmead. Once I'd spilled blood, the Merum order would no longer allow me to complete my vows."

The king shrugged as if my grief were of no moment. "The Vanguard would have welcomed you," Laidir said. "There are any number of warrior priests in their ranks. Or if you no longer desired to bear a weapon you could have become a Servant." His smile pulled to one side. "And the Absold would have accepted you for the price of repentance."

I wondered that the king of Collum should care, but I answered the implied question just the same. "Your Majesty, how can I explain? Once the Merum priesthood became unattainable, I no longer felt worthy of the position with any of the orders." That wasn't the whole truth. As if his presence dragged it from me, I amended my confession. "The other factions of the church do not practice the haeling as the Merum do. My time as a postulant wedded me to an idea that I couldn't surrender."

Laidir nodded. "I understand, but what shall we do about the duke?"

I tried not to gape at his question but failed at it. "Sire, can you not just have him killed? He's taken upon himself more than the gift of his family. One of your court musicians lies dead at his hand."

The king had already started shaking his head before I finished. "I have the tenuous accusation of a minor reeve before me, Willet Dura, against all the wealth and wiles of Collum's most powerful family." He shook his head. "Your charge will ring hollow. Duke Orlan is a strutting peacock who shows open disdain for all around him, the throne included."

Laidir's eyebrows rose, questioning. "I require proof. Of all the people in the throne room, you are the only one who thought to watch the duke for evidence of a physical gift."

He sighed. "But there is more at stake here. The duke is the second-most powerful man in the kingdom. He commands the allegiance of a full third of the nobles in my court and through them, nearly half the resources of Collum. If I bring an accusation against him without proof, true or not, I have weakened my rule. If Owmead commits to war again, the duke, by virtue of his men at arms, will control the kingdom whether or not he sits the throne."

"What can I do?" I asked him.

"What you can do is up to Aer," Laidir said. "What you *will* do is up to you. Duke Orlan is no fool. His mind is more subtle than it appears. If what you charge is true, he's probably aware of his mistake in court tonight. You're in danger, but if I put guards around you, he will know I suspect him."

Misgiving filled me. "How may I serve you, Your Majesty?"

Laidir nodded. "Only two gifts have gone missing. Without the rest, Orlan cannot pass the church's tests for the throne. This provides a measure of time in which we can act. Your intervention tonight was timely. Most of the men under arms loyal to me occupy the line of border castles to the south. If I cannot prove his guilt, then I will blunt his ambition." He smiled. "Let us see how Orlan responds once my men fill Bunard and his are ordered to the border."

"You believe me, Your Majesty?"

Laidir mustered a smile. “Aye, too many coincidences align in favor of your argument, but I require proof. Serve the duke at court each night as ordered and tell me of anything you learn.” The king moved to a cabinet along the wall where he opened a drawer and withdrew a purse. “Information can be costly.” Pressing it into my hand, he turned to the red-haired guard. “Take him, his back will require attention.” The king gave me a last admonition. “Despite the duke’s order for you to serve him each night, he might very well have his men hunt you down. Stay with Galen until dawn.”

I left in the company of the guard, walking upright to avoid breaking my wounds open again. “Who is Galen?” I asked.

The guard’s voice rumbled down at me like a pronouncement from heaven. “The king’s physician.”

# Chapter 8

"Hmm. Hmm. This is going to sting a bit."

I sat on a high stool within Galen's apartments, two levels below the top of the tor where Laidir held court. The sloshing sounds of a bottle being shaken came to me, then the soft pop of a stopper being pulled.

His voice came from behind me. "I'm getting a bit tired of stitching up servants. The duke and his men are turning me into a seamstress. Brace yourself." A burning sensation hit me almost as greatly as the original strokes that laid my back open. I hissed a sound like water dousing a fire.

"You have a gift for understatement," I said once I could breathe normally.

A chuckle drifted over my shoulder, and I felt a push against my back, but no discomfort. "The balm deadens the pain," he murmured, "but only after it makes you relive it. I've asked my alchemist to reformulate the mixture without the use of spirits, but so far he's been unsuccessful."

I drew a shuddering breath. "Have you tried a better?"

Galen laughed. "Myle is the best. He's gifted and incredibly talented as well, though somewhat difficult to work with. If a different mixture can be found, he's the one to find it."

I turned my head, careful not to disturb Galen's embroidery. "Would he know anything about poisons?"

Galen paused in his needlework. "That's a dangerous question, master Dura. Who are you planning to poison?"

I shook my head. “No one.” In that moment I appropriated an informal title that Laidir had implied moments earlier. “I’m the king’s reeve.” I assumed the king’s physician would be loyal but, even so, thought it best to hedge my speech. “A man died some time ago from a stroke. The circumstances of his death made me question whether it was natural.”

“Hmm,” Galen said in a tone that might have accompanied a shake of the head. “Most poisons are actually medicines taken to an extreme, but I’ve never heard of one that could mimic a stroke. If anyone would know if it could be done, it would be Myle, but getting the information out of him will be a challenge.” He blinked at me beneath bushy eyebrows that made him look like an owl. “I did say he was difficult to work with, didn’t I?”

“I’m a reeve. He’ll talk to me,” I said.

“No,” Galen said. “You don’t understand.” He sighed. “And any explanation I offer probably wouldn’t do it justice. You’ll just have to see for yourself.”

He quieted, and sometime later I jerked when he tapped me on the shoulder. Somehow he’d managed to wrap my wound without my knowing. “That’s the effect of the balm,” Galen said. “It will help you sleep. There’s a pallet over there.” He pointed to the corner.

I stumbled to the promise of slumber as if it offered some deeper salvation than just rest and lay down, my body going lax almost before it hit the pallet.

Galen’s hollow-eyed visage filled my vision when I awoke the next morning. I saw him cast a look of relief out the window as he drew a deep breath and released it, whispering from him in a long sigh. But fear tinged his relief.

“Willet Dura,” he said, “do you know me?”

I almost laughed at the question except for the seriousness behind it. “How well can one man really know another, master physician?”

He didn’t laugh, but I saw tension ease from his shoulders. “You’ve spent the night trying to leave, staring through me as if I didn’t exist.” He gestured at the door leading back into the hallway of Laidir’s tor. “If it weren’t for the lock, you would have left two hours after midnight.”

Fear cleared the sleepy fog from my brain between heartbeats. I’d tried to night-walk, which meant someone in the city had been murdered. It might not have anything to do with the Orlan family, but I didn’t believe it for a second. By now the duke and his men would have noticed their man at the library had gone missing. That, coupled with his mistake in court, and it seemed more than plausible that Orlan wanted to mimic the gift of kings as quickly as possible. How far was he from completing it? Did he have it already? Curse it—I knew I was moving too slowly, but I had no idea how much time I had left or even if I had any at all.

I lifted my head to see Galen staring at me as if he’d asked me a question and I’d refused to answer. What had he said? Yes. The lock on the door.

“Since the last war, I’ve been a night-walker,” I said, praying to Aer the physician would accept that lesser truth, but he shook his head.

“No. Even the nobles, inured to pain as many of them are, struggle with the aftereffects of war. I’ve watched men rise from their beds and dress, their eyes fixed on some horror of their past, drawn to walk the streets of the city searching for an answer. This is something different.”

I needed to leave, but something within Galen’s speech or manner promised an answer of sorts to my greatest dread and need. Outwardly, I shrugged. “It sounds the same to me.”

He shook his head, his gaze boring into mine as if he could find some other truth behind my eyes. “Those men wake up when called, startled to find themselves removed from the comfort of their beds. I couldn’t wake you, Willet Dura.”

An answer of sorts. “Perhaps it just took a bit longer,” I said.

He shook his head. “I didn’t wake you.” The king’s physician pointed out the window. “I’d ceased calling your name hours ago, but when the first light of the sun touched you, your mind returned.”

I'd been trained for years to be a priest, but even the most casual adherent to the faith could see the implication made plain in Galen's words. He seemed trustworthy, but I'd already confided everything I knew of my secret to Ealdor and I knew the old saying as well as the next man: Three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead.

"Each man's response to war is different," I said, nodding toward the door.

Galen gave me a reluctant nod, his owlish eyes blinking twice before he turned and fished the key from around his neck. His soft question followed me like a curse into the hallway. "But is it war you're responding to?"

I kept to the most populated parts of the tor, following in the footsteps of the crowd of servants who'd awoken well before their masters. During the descent, as I traversed one set of broad stone steps after another, I debated my next course of action.

I could search out Myle, the alchemist, the man who might be able to link Orlan to Ian's death or I could report to Jeb and try to find out whether the person murdered the previous night owned some gift that had supposedly gone free.

When I reached the bottom level I set my steps toward the higher merchants' quarter. Deep inside where I wouldn't have mentioned it to anyone, I thought of the times I'd seen Lady Gael walking that same route early in the morning, and I hoped to see her again.

It probably wasn't the best way to make a life-or-death decision, but I consoled myself with the assumption that even if the murder was tied to Duke Orlan, all I would find was the crumpled form of some unfortunate who appeared to have had a stroke. I sighed. Reeves couldn't prevent murder, we could only investigate it.

I registered every face on the way, searching for anyone who might be following me, but looking for Lady Gael as well. After

asking for directions to Myle's shop twice, I came to a low, squat building of stone without seeing pursuit or her.

Smoke poured from an open window, and the smell of sulfur hung heavy in the air. The clank of metal implements being moved escaped from beneath the door as I rapped my knuckles on it. The ruckus continued unabated, and I raised my fist to knock harder.

"That won't work," a voice said from behind me.

I turned, a dagger in my left hand and over a foot of steel pulled with my right before her face registered. She took no alarm to my reaction other than a slight widening of the eyes and a step back to place herself beyond reach of my sword.

"I've never seen a court servant seek out an alchemist before. I so enjoy it when my suspicions prove well-founded," she said. "Do you work for the castellan?"

I didn't have time to try and resurrect a façade she hadn't believed from the first, but trust had become a habit hard to come by. "Just a man with questions, my lady," I said. "A friend told me Myle is the most skilled alchemist in the city."

She shook her head at me, and I gave myself permission to enjoy the way her hair flowed with the motion. "He won't talk to you."

So Galen had said. For some reason it sounded more plausible coming from her. "Will he talk to you?"

She nodded. "What incentive do you have to offer?"

Her response took me off guard. "I'm common born, as your sister pointed out, and the two of you wager more in an evening than I could earn in months. What could I offer one of the kingdom's nobles?"

Her lips shaped a smile without showing teeth. "Information is a commodity everyone possesses in *some* measure. Let's start with your name and occupation."

"Start?" I said. "I'd like to know the end as well. Tell me how much of this commodity you require."

She pointed at the door. "Feel free to unlock Myle's mouth on your own if you choose, but if you frighten him, he'll never talk in your presence." Then she nodded. "You see, I just gave you a piece of information. The expectation is that you'll reciprocate."

I'd seen merchants bargain before, some of them working the transaction so closely they worked in fractions of pennies for the product, squeezing the last ounce of profit from their negotiation. I had a feeling Lady Gael rarely lost on a deal.

"My name is Willet Dura, and I'm the king's reeve," I said. "Why are you here?"

She smiled a bit broader this time. "Myle mixes colors for me. The king doesn't have a reeve, he has a castellan, and you're not him."

"I'm a reeve," I said simply, my face heating at the correction. "Usually, I work the crimes in the poor quarter."

"So they don't think much of your skills, master reeve," Lady Gael said, "or else they wouldn't banish you to the dregs of the city."

"They're not dregs," I said, my tone sharp. "If their visages don't show the image of Aer so clearly as some, then perhaps it's His way of getting us to look more closely."

Now her smile showed teeth and the mocking tilt to her head had vanished. "You can tell a lot about a man by offering an insult to what he values." She walked past me. "Reeve Dura, our negotiations are over. Don't talk directly to him unless he talks to you."

Gael opened the door to the small stone workshop.

"He doesn't lock his door?"

She smiled at my surprise. "Myle deals in any number of powders and potions that can be fatal to the ignorant. Only a very great fool would attempt to harm him in his workshop."

When I stepped inside, I stopped to gaze at the interior. Twice now, Myle had been described in the terms people reserve for those who possess extreme talent as well as the genius a gift bestows, but I doubted whether such a collection of chaos had ever been assembled before. Bowls and implements littered the high tables and shelves without regard to order. Stoppered jars showed a collection of powders and liquids that ran all across the far wall and occupied space on the floor. At least half a dozen mortar-and-pestle sets could be seen on a small centrally located table. A fireplace fed a kiln with a small bellows next to the window. Missing chips of stone from the hearth and wildly colored burn marks on the bricks testified to the

fact that on several occasions Myle's preparations had yielded violent results.

"Watch your step," Gael said, picking her way over to the alchemist. "Don't touch anything. Myle has it arranged exactly the way he wants it."

"Astonishing," I muttered.

Gael laughed. I noted how clean and uncomplicated the sound was. "Good morning, Myle."

A figure sat at the table farthest removed from the window, his back to us and his face hidden by a curtain of lank, dirty hair.

"Good morning, Gael."

She noted my surprise. "I don't think he understands the concept of titles or nobility."

Myle held his head inches away from a crucible, his fingers poised inches above it, pinching a minuscule amount of some red powder that stained his fingers the color of blood. Curious, I drew close to observe just as Myle's small motion allowed a few grains of the powder to drift down to the surface of an oily liquid.

Nothing happened, but Myle appeared satisfied. He took a white piece of linen from a stack on the underside of the table and dipped the edge into the mixture. When he withdrew it, the fabric had turned to the most vivid shade of sunset I'd ever seen, the color somewhere between the red of blood and the pink of roses.

Gael approached and studied the hue with the concentrated intensity of a theologian dissecting an argument. "Beautiful as always, Myle, but will it work with silk?"

He shook his head without making eye contact with her. "Not without an acid to etch the fibers. I just have to find the right amount." He blinked as if he were calculating. "Two days, possibly less."

Gael's smile of surprised pleasure lit the room. Myle seemed to share my enjoyment of it. "Who's he?" he asked, turning away.

For a moment I didn't realize the off-hand question had been directed at me. I drew breath to reply, but Gael's hand on my arm stopped me. "He hasn't spoken to you," she said, "only about you, and he still needs to know you're safe."

"How will he know that?" I asked, but she didn't answer. Now that the wonder of Myle's workshop had faded, impatience gnawed at my guts. Time was as much the enemy as Duke Orlan.

"This is Willet Dura," Gael said. "He told me he was the king's reeve."

Why had she chosen to introduce me by my self-assumed title? I turned to ask her when a clattering noise jerked my attention away and something wet covered my hand. I started, stepping back to see Myle watching me from behind his curtain of hair. A puddle of yellow liquid formed on the floor, dripping from my fingers, and a shallow metal bowl with more of the same thick syrup turned lazy circles on Myle's floor.

The room swam in my eyes as if I were seeing it through a sheet of running water before righting itself.

# Chapter 9

Gael sighed and knelt to pick up the bowl, using the dyed cloth to protect her hand. The smell of lemongrass mingled with metallic scents I couldn't hope to identify, filling the air. I wiped the liquid onto my cloak and stared in disgust at the clutter. "Why doesn't he organize it? He's going to kill himself in here."

Gael laughed, pointing at the chipped stones around the window. "I suppose he doesn't think tripping is the biggest threat."

"Ask him, Gael," Myle said.

Gael nodded, then turned her full attention on where I stood in the middle of the workroom, weaving on my feet like a stalk of grain in the wind. "Do you intend any harm to me or Myle?"

"No," I said, trying to answer simply, but my mouth seemed to want to run ahead of my mind. "I'm trying to find a way to prove"—I clamped my teeth shut around the name—"someone's guilt in a murder."

"Whose guilt?" Gael asked.

At first I didn't answer. As much as I wanted to confide in her, the currents in the king's court ran deep and dangerous in ways I couldn't understand, and Orlan owned her allegiance.

Her gaze bored into mine, her blue eyes intent. I could think of worse ways to pass the time.

"You can trust me," she said.

Why did I believe her?

After the first question, Myle appeared to lose interest in the conversation, but curiosity lit Gael's blue eyes from within. "Why did you come to court posing as a servant?"

I didn’t see the harm in answering and the words spilled from me of their own volition. “Duke Orlan is trying to duplicate the gift of kings.” I gaped at my blunder. “I should never have said that, my lady. Please pardon my indiscretion.”

She took a step back as if I’d struck her, but Myle never stirred from the inspection of powders at his table. “You have proof, master reeve?”

I nodded, intent on keeping my answer to that gesture alone, but my mouth seemed more tied to her will than my own. “Two gifts have gone free in the last month, pure gifts, and I saw the duke do something only a gifted could do.” But even as I said it, Laidir’s questions sowed doubt into my mind and my stomach lurched. What might I have to do?

“Does the king know?” she demanded.

I nodded, almost desperate to answer. “He knows.”

Something in my response failed to satisfy her. Her tone turned serious. “But what is he doing about it?”

My brain struggled to figure out some way to rescue the hash I’d made of the conversation. If she were aligned with Orlan, I had to sow doubt in her mind. “He will have the duke’s men dispatched to the border forts.” Too many notions warred in my head—I couldn’t seem to sort them out.

“Why did you come to Myle, Willet Dura?” she asked.

“One of the king’s musician’s was murdered,” I said. “I think someone gave him poison to make it appear he had a stroke.” I nodded toward Myle. “The king’s physician said if anyone knew whether it was possible, it would be him. He said Myle was the best alchemist in Collum.” Inside I breathed a prayer of thanks that my answer hadn’t included the consequences of my night walks.

Myle’s face remained hidden behind his curtain of hair, but the stone walls brought his muttered comment to me even so. “The best in Bunard. Second best in Collum.” He paused as if in thought. “Possible, but only for a few.”

I hardly needed to ask my next question, but nothing could be left to chance. “Who’s better than you?” I’d forgotten to relay the question through Gael, but Myle chose to answer anyway.

“Lira Obair.”

Either Gael didn’t notice the way I reeled with Myle’s response or she didn’t care. “What will you do now?”

That question seemed safer. In the end, I was expendable. “The duke has ordered me to serve him at court. I’m going to listen for any information that might prove his guilt.”

“Are you sure he’s guilty?”

I nodded. “He caught the flagon.” She didn’t have to speak, her exquisite eyebrows framed the question just as well. I gave her the same explanation I gave the king. By the time I finished, her gaze testified to her amazement. One of the ideas struggling for recognition within my mind became clear, and I reached out to grasp her hand. Too late, she tried to jerk away.

I held her fast despite the oily liquid that still clung to my skin. “What poison did you give me?”

She wrenched her hand from my grasp and I saw her waver on her feet. “Myle doesn’t have a name for it.” Her lips pursed as if she tried to force them to her will and they refused.

“Why did you speak to me at court?” she asked.

I blinked, and for a moment my resolve held and the answer stayed locked behind my teeth.

Gael blinked in surprise. “Tell me why you spoke to me at court.”

My intention crumbled and my face heated to mimic the color and heat of Myle’s kiln. “I’ve seen you a few times as I journeyed from the tor to the poor quarter and wanted to see if the mind matched the beauty.” I shook my head. “I shouldn’t have spoken.”

“And does it?” Gael asked, the blue of her eyes, a richer color than a cloudless sky, intent.

“Aye,” I answered. For once my mouth didn’t run away with me. I struggled to get my next question out. “How long does the effect last?”

Gael shook her head, but the answer came anyway. “A fraction of an hour, perhaps ten minutes.”

“What do you love about her?” Myle asked from behind the curtain of his dark hair.

Gael's eyes widened, and for a moment I thought she would order me not to answer, but the silence that ensued carried a force that pried the words from my lips, though inside I wanted to grind my teeth in frustration. I fell into my confession like a leper who sought healing by bathing naked in the river.

"The sweep of her jawline," I said. "The fullness of her lips." I gazed at them and she bit the lower one, her face flushing. "The darkness of her brows and the way they follow the thoughts of her mind." My mind grew fuzzy. "Did I mention her lips? They shape words into something more than mere speech." I shook my head. "Her mind and wit are quick enough to delight any man, yet she misses the truth of her beauty. And I have watched as she walks the merchants' quarter bestowing kindnesses on the unfortunate."

I let my gaze flow from her neck down across the slim strength outlined in the dress she wore. "She's tall and comely enough for any man, the flow of her clothes hinting at . . ."

"You may stop now," she said quickly.

Released from the question, I attacked again. "Who else knows of the poison? Is there an antidote?"

Gael shook her head, but her eyes retained the same slightly unfocused look. "No one and there is none."

"Too dangerous," Myle muttered from his perch. "Information is the greatest power of all." He didn't bother to turn around.

The room swam, and suddenly the floor, despite its exotic mix of dirt and potions, seemed like a perfectly fine place to sit. Gael stared down at me, her expression carrying far too many emotional ingredients for me to identify them all, but I thought I noted a measure of compassion among them.

"Those who visit Myle's shop for the first time are questioned," she said, her gaze clearing. Those perfect brows drew together. "How did you know you'd been drugged?"

"I was the clue." In stages the disorganized swirl of thoughts in my head coalesced into order once more. "As much as I—" I struggled for a description that wouldn't be inappropriate—"admire you, Lady Gael, I would never surrender my thoughts in that way. I

hope you're more careful with other visitors to Myle's workshop. You might reveal dangerous secrets."

She nodded. If she took any offense at my correction, it didn't show. "Usually we just ask the one question."

The other idea I'd been struggling to bring forth came together. "Orlan may already have all the gifts he needs to duplicate Laidir's ability." There was no longer any point to shading the truth, and I needed her help. "By law, if I can prove his guilt, his life is forfeit."

When she nodded, I struggled to rise to a standing position but then gave up. "He's ordered me to serve him tonight." Her face wavered in my vision in a way that had nothing to do with my personal feelings, and I found myself staring at the ceiling with my back on the floor.

I looked at Gael, who swayed back and forth in my vision like an inverted pendulum. "What's wrong with me?"

She swallowed, clutching the edge of the table next to her for support. "It's Myle's drug. You absorbed too much of it."

Her lips still moved in my sight, but her voice became the soft buzz of insects on a summer day. Invisible weights pulled my eyelids closed.

When they opened, the russet glow of sunset had painted the landscape crimson and ochre outside the window. Myles and Gael were both gone. I ran back to the tor at a pace that had me panting and lathered like a horse, but for all that, the thoughts in my mind were faster. They'd left me. No, she'd left me after I'd been drugged into confiding in her.

But if Gael wanted to prevent me from saving the king, why not just kill me? I shook my head. Too many questions. A grim smile etched its way across my face. The blade wasn't her style. All she had to do was get Myle to use his poison to delay me. Then, after

Orlan had taken the throne, he could dispose of me at his leisure. Fool that I was, I'd never asked her if she was loyal to the king.

A small voice in my mind that sounded far too much like Ealdor's tried to point out the flaw in my logic, but I refused to listen. Lady Gael represented all the good fortune and possibilities I'd learned to distrust because they were so unlikely. I patted the pocket sewn into my cloak.

I made for the main entrance and passed through the giant arch as the last bit of dusk light died, my mind and gaze filled with the necessity of getting to Laidir's court. A hand closed on my arm like a steel trap, and I pulled a dagger with my free hand at the same moment that Jeb's face registered. He shoved me back out of striking distance into the shadows and waited for me to sheath the dagger.

"Follow me," he ordered, leading me to an out of the way corridor off the entrance hall. Twice he checked over his shoulder before he spoke. I heard both sets of knuckles crack at his sides, and he faced me as if he couldn't decide whether to be angry. He'd never minced words in my presence, or anybody else's for that matter, but he stood there, his jaw working. "There's been another death."

Somewhere in my middle I knew the answer to my next question before I asked, but there was a dance to the conversation I felt obliged to follow. "Were they gifted?"

At his nod, I followed with another question. "Stroke?"

"The king's castellan is dead."

That surprised me, but conflicts within noble families could be as bloody as warfare. "What was his gift?"

Jeb looked at me as if I were stupid. "He was the king's castellan, Dura. What do you think?"

I nodded. "Helps." That made three gifts the duke possessed. He didn't have them all yet. I felt a bit of the tension ease between my shoulders. I still had time. Then I saw the scrap of parchment in Jeb's hand, his eyes filled with the knowledge of what was written on it.

*Willet,*

*Two free gifts from the Orlan province are unaccounted for.*

*—C*

My guts hollowed out. I hadn't counted on the fact the duke might have taken other gifts besides Lira's outside of the city. While Bunard held the vast majority of the gifted in Collum, that didn't preclude the smaller cities or even some of the larger villages from having one or two of the gifted within them. How long had Orlan been plotting his ascension?

"I need more time." Doubt wove tentative threads through my voice, and the sound barely made it to my own ears, but Jeb answered even so.

"He won't wait. King Laidir will die."

I shook my head. "He can't kill him at court. He'll have to wait until he leaves the tor."

Jeb's laugh didn't have any humor in it, but then again, it never did. "Don't be simple, Dura," he hissed. "Of course he can. He just has to give the king the same poison he's given everyone else. Then he can claim the gift of kings came to him. And now he can prove it. He might not even have to show evidence of all of them. After demonstrating one or two gifts outside of his own, the clergy will put the throne on his head, relieved that they don't have to search the kingdom for some unwashed peasant with abilities he shouldn't have. Orlan will plant his netherside on the throne, and within hours his men's swords will be at our necks."

"*Our* necks?"

Jeb shook his head at me. "Do you think you can keep the duke from discovering your identity? He probably knows it already. You and everyone around you will fall under his suspicion." Jeb's grin mocked both of us now. "That includes me."

The stitches in my back chose that moment to remind me of my last trip to the throne room. "If he knows who I am, I won't survive the evening."

For some reason, Jeb found this amusing. “Then help yourself to the wine, Dura. It’s probably better than anything you can get in the city.”

I nodded. Too many of my friends from the war had tried to drown their memories in wine or spirits. Most of them just ended up drowning themselves, dying with a network of veins showing through the yellowed skin on their faces. A few went literally, their bodies recovered from the Rinwash, where they’d fallen in their stupor.

If I survived the evening, but Orlan succeeded in taking the throne, I’d be executed in short order. I had one chance of coming out of the evening alive and proving Orlan’s guilt.

But if I failed to unmask him? The worn leather of my dagger’s hilt glided under my fingertips and I looked down. Flexing my ankle to the side, I reassured myself of the dagger in my boot.

Jeb followed my gaze and gave me a nod of approval. “You’re a dead man, Dura, but the king can live. A servant can get within arm’s length of the duke, where a reeve can’t.” His laugh could have ripped the bark from a tree. “By my hope of heaven, his brother will probably make you serve him all night.”

I could almost imagine I heard the strains of music starting in Laidir’s court far above us. “I have to get to the chamberlain.”

Jeb nodded. “Yes. I imagine you do.”

# Chapter 10

One level down from Laidir's court, I ran through the hall of heroes, flashing past the panoply of weapons and armor that depicted the history of Collum in iron and blood. I'd visited the hall often as a boy, my childish eyes and mind filled with notions of desperate glory and valor. Now the remnants and implements of men and women whose more sane choices had been taken away flew past me.

I came up to the topmost floor of Laidir's tor with my head tilted down in the manner of a servant but my eyes searching everywhere for the duke's men. When I came to the massive double doors that marked the entrance to the king's court, I turned to the left, circling around toward the kitchens and servants' quarters.

Strains of music drifted to me, and I prayed I would be in time. Turning a corner at a run, I nearly crashed into the court chamberlain.

"Your pardon," I said. I tried to shuffle past him, tried to ignore the way his face went florid at the sight of me, but he threw out a hand that could have doubled as a mace and brought me to a stop.

"My debt to Jeb is paid." His tone tried to compete with his face. "If I see you again in the king's court, I'll whip you myself."

A wide space in the bustle had cleared around us. The servants treated the chamberlain's temper the same as the reeves treated Jeb's. I stepped in close to whisper. "I'm a fool to come back here."

His brows lifted, and I took the opportunity to pull my arm free. "I saw something the duke needs to keep hidden. My life is forfeit. Why would I come back?"

The chamberlain frowned, trying to piece together the nonsense of my arguments. I made it easier for him. “What oath does every servant in the tor recite?”

The chamberlain’s arms hung at his side, no longer threatening. “To serve the king.”

I pointed to the far corner of the room, where a neatly folded stack of servant’s garb stood waiting. “You know Jeb. He hates getting involved in other people’s affairs.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “He hates other people.”

I saw the chamberlain almost smile then I saw him make the mental connection. He nodded toward the garments. “They’ll be serving the wine any second.”

“Don’t let the king drink anything tonight,” I said. “Nothing.”

I winced as I lifted my arms and forced them through the vest. A slow, warm trickle worked its way down my back. “It’s just as well it’s red,” I said, but the chamberlain had already turned away.

I lifted a large flagon brimming with blood red wine and made my way into the light and sound of Laidir’s court. Except for the fact that the nobles had changed clothes, I might have stepped into the previous night. Musicians of consummate skill still played for nobles who took their efforts for granted. Concentric circles of Collum’s most powerful danced in time to the music, coarse jests and laughter weaving discordant strains in counterpoint. Groups of nobles stood in attendance, no doubt plotting how they might contrive to rise a bit higher than the one who owned the title just above them.

I tapped my left forearm against my side, taking comfort in the hard feel of the rondel, the feather-thin throwing dagger strapped against my skin. Despite the presence of steel, my hands shook, sloshing crimson onto the floor. Desperate to lower the level of wine in the flagon before coming into the duke’s presence, I searched out the nearest noble to serve. Another beating at his hand would prevent me from exposing him as effectively as a sword stroke.

Hysterical laughter threatened to well up from some black humor within me. The king’s life might very well depend on how well I served the duke. No servant in his right mind would seek out the

man who'd scourged him the night before, but my success depended upon it.

The shifting crowd parted, like sand in an hourglass, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of lustrous hair gathered at the nape, revealing the delicate arch of a neck. Working my way in Lady Gael's direction, I stopped to refresh the glasses of nobles along the way, careful to conserve enough wine to serve the duke, should he require it.

Some part of my mind that I wanted to silence whispered to me, and I turned away, reminding myself I'd woken alone in Myle's shop at dusk. Cynical suspicions again flooded through me, like a parade of unwelcome guests. Court politics were murky. If the duke became the power in the kingdom, who else would stand to gain?

"Be quiet," I said aloud.

Several of the nobles turned toward me, and I ducked and bowed and shuffled away. "Fool," I muttered. "How many times have you laughed at some idiot undone by a pretty face?" But the realization that I was the idiot twisted like a dagger thrust in my guts, and for a moment I felt so alone it was as if my family had died from the fever all over again.

I tapped the blade against my forearm for comfort.

A tug at my sleeve startled me and wine splattered the stones of the floor. I pressed my left arm against my side, as if the crowd might see the weapon I hid there.

"Wine, if you please."

I knew that voice, knew that if I raised my glance I would see a perfect mouth shaping common speech into uncommon beauty. Rage burned across my vision at my foolishness.

"At your service, my lady," I said, but the servant's monotone wouldn't come and undercurrents of anger flowed through my voice. Then I looked up to meet her gaze. Nothing but curiosity and surprise showed in her eyes, and a smile just beginning to flee. Oh, she was good.

"You should leave," she said, taking a sip from her glass. "The duke has little tolerance for servants whose countenances are less than fawning."

Of course she would say that. I ducked my head and made a show of refilling her goblet. "You are perhaps surprised to see me here, my lady?" Accusation filled the spaces between the words of my question.

"No." Her voice hardened in answer to mine. "I knew you would come if you could." She stepped closer. "You cannot hope to approach Orlan with your anger burning in your face, reeve. At the least he will send you to the chamberlain for discipline. 'An angry neighbor is like vinegar to the teeth.' Yes?" she asked.

"Do not quote scripture to me," I snarled. "I know it better. Were it not for the whims of nobles like you, I would have been a priest."

Her eyes narrowed. "Your anger is directed at me?"

*Fool!* I'd let her presence distract me again. Now my behavior had given her reason to denounce me and have me removed. I bowed toward her wine glass and turned to move away. In my mind I took my heart in my hands and tore it to pieces.

"You will remain until you are dismissed," Lady Gael's voice, unexpectedly loud, filled the space around us, and several nobles turned at the distraction. "Your success or failure is mine to grant or deny," she whispered, stepping close. She gripped my arm as if she meant to wrestle the truth from me. "Explain yourself," she added. "And do not think to dissemble with me, *servant*."

I swallowed, preparing myself for the worst necessity. If Lady Gael proved loyal to the duke, I would have to take my chances on an attack. Inwardly I sighed. Daggers against swords made for poor odds, and the stripes across my back would make it difficult to throw a dagger well. "I slept until dusk, my lady, and woke alone, on my own and by merest chance managed to return to the tor in time to serve." I held her gaze with mine as if we were of equal station. "Merest chance," I repeated.

Her face and mouth, so wonderfully, so deceitfully expressive, hardened until they might have been carved from the most lifelike marble. "You accuse me? The alchemist's art is less than exact, or did you not witness the signs of experimentation on his ceiling?"

I wanted to believe her, but I treated that desire with all the distrust I could muster. The life of the king lay in my hands.

My reply died on my tongue as I looked across the room and saw a man in the customary dress of the castellan, a red vest surmounting black hose, standing next to the king. In his hand he held a large goblet, but while those around him drank, he made a show of raising the glass to his lips—a journey that was never quite completed. "Who is he?" I muttered to myself, but Gael picked up the question as if it were addressed to her.

"The new castellan," Gael said. "Of course, master servant, you have the option of believing me or not."

I ignored the barb, my attention focused on the king's dais, where he sat next to the queen and his son, observing the festivities of his court. The duke would know what I'd just now realized. He couldn't poison the king while the queen and prince were present. Even the fastest poison would allow the king to pass the gift onto his wife or son in full view of the crowd.

I needed an ally, and the only possibility close to hand was a woman whose face made a shamble of my thoughts and emotions. And who owed her allegiance to the Orlan family.

For the nine years I'd been a reeve, I'd honed my skill of discerning the truth from a man or woman based on what I learned of the minds of the people in the poor quarter. Lady Gael played a more subtle game than pickpockets or night women.

"Why did you leave me on the floor of his shop?"

She drew herself up until she appeared to gaze down at me, though we were equally matched in height. "Do I owe answers or allegiance to a servant?"

For a moment something more than anger stirred in the depths of her eyes, a flicker and tightening that I would have characterized as hurt in one of common birth, but that was ridiculous and I mistrusted it. I'd seen enough of nobles in the king's court to know they donned and shed emotions the way others did clothes, and her answer only served to strengthen my suspicion.

Movement over Lady Gael's shoulder caught my eye, and I partook of Jeb's vocabulary. Queen Cailin and the prince had risen and were departing, the boy following his mother with the stubby jackleg strides of a toddler.

"Why are they leaving?"

Her gaze could have soured milk. "The boy is a child. You're dense even for a man, master servant."

*Enough.* "The question didn't require an answer, my lady." I lowered my voice to a hiss. "I misspoke. What I meant to say was 'Now that the king is alone, fast poison will keep him from passing his gift on to the child.' Is that more to your liking? *My lady*?"

I pulled the scrap of parchment from inside my tunic with Custos's flowing script on in, waving it as though she already knew the contents. "Orlan has assembled all the gifts he needs. If the king dies without blessing the prince, his gift goes free and the duke will pass any test the clergy can pose. Confession or not, the duke must die."

She paled, her eyes and lips growing stark against the pallor of her skin, but I didn't relent. My desperation didn't allow it. "Without the queen and the prince at his side the king's life is forfeit."

# Chapter 11

Outside, the last light of day faded and I saw the king rise to make his welcome. I breathed a sigh of relief at seeing his hands empty—I had a few moments yet to get to the duke. Musicians and singers temporarily halted their performances, and to one side I saw the juggler work his sleight of hand, his brightly colored balls disappearing from the air as if by magic despite the efforts of several children to distract him.

I stopped, staring. What had I seen that night? What had I heard?

Threading my way through the crowd, bowing my apologies as if I needed to refill my flagon, I made my way to the juggler's perch. He stood on his balancing ball upon the small block of wood, his feet just above the level of my head. Up close, I could see past the distraction of his outfit to note he had the coloring of an Aillean.

"Nobles all," Laidir intoned from the far end of the hall, "be welcome at the end of day, and let our merriment defy the darkness that . . ."

I tapped the juggler on the feet, offering him wine.

Without flourish he dismounted to stand before me. I retrieved a goblet and filled it for him, but he only sipped it.

"You are highly skilled, master juggler." I bowed as if I might have offended him. "Are you titled?"

Off his perch, he was shorter than I had expected, his eyes a full hand below mine. He shook his head. "No. While my talent is quite strong," he said, lifting his hands in a self-deprecating gesture, "my gift is only partial. Since I'm too short to make a good soldier, I decided to become a juggler."

I shook my head. “I congratulate you on your fortune, then. There was little to enjoy in being a soldier in our last war.”

He nodded, taking another small sip of wine, but saying nothing more.

I took a deep breath. “Your ability to maintain your weave despite all the distractions is remarkable.”

The juggler nodded, but I saw his eyes narrow. “It is practiced. There are times when a king’s court can be tumultuous, yah?”

I ducked my head. “Forgive my presumption, master juggler, but in the midst of my embarrassment last night, I thought I heard the clatter of your daggers hitting the floor.” I straightened to meet his gaze. “I was wondering what you saw to make you lose your concentration?”

He smiled at me. “No one else noticed my slip. You were more entertaining by far.”

I rolled my shoulders and plastered a grin to my face. “I hope to avoid a repeat performance, but I doubt the sight of a clumsy servant getting scourged is unusual enough to distract you.”

“See much, say little,” the juggler said in a singsong.

I nodded my agreement. “Words to live by, but who listens to a servant?” I reached beneath the vest to where I’d hidden the purse Laidir had given me and pulled it loose. Opening it I withdrew a coin . . . and nearly dropped it when I saw the color of gold.

Fear and greed warred with each other on the servant’s face. “Who are you?”

“The king’s reeve,” I said, pushing the coin into his hand.

The coin disappeared, and he smiled at me. “You shouldn’t surrender your coin, master reeve, before you get what you’re after.”

I let my expression mirror his. “I feel confident you’ll answer my question.”

His smile grew mocking. “Why so?”

I watched his eyes follow the king’s purse as I tucked it away. If the rest of the coins in it held the same hue as the first, I wanted nothing more than to return it as quickly as possible. Gold in the hands of a commoner brought danger, and I already owned more than my share. “Because if you don’t, I won’t give you any more.”

"I won't be able to come back here, ever," he said.

"With two gold crowns, you won't have to." Behind me, Laidir raised his hands, signaling the end of his welcome. "Now quickly, what did you see?"

No one stood within ten paces of us, but even so, the juggler moved closer. "I saw someone with a gift." He licked his lips and swallowed as if he'd just confessed to murder.

"Nearly every noble in here has a gift," I said.

"You know what I mean, master servant. You threw it."

I nodded. "The duke caught the flagon."

The juggler shook his head. "No. It landed in his hand."

"What?"

As if gold had opened a sluice gate, his admission poured from him. "No amount of practice would make me confident enough to perform a trick like that."

"Curse you," I growled. "What trick?"

His eyes widened as my ignorance became plain and I saw him take two breaths in succession. "The duke's brother struck the flagon, deflecting and spinning it so that the handle came to rest in the duke's hand."

What had I seen? "Luck?"

He shook his head. "You're *gnath*, yah?" he asked. But he didn't wait for an answer. "My gift is just partial, but the intersection of it with my talent allows me to see what others miss." He held up a hand and without seeming to move a dagger appeared in it. "The marquis didn't just slap the flagon with his fingers, changing its direction, and spin so that it landed in the duke's hand," he said. "He misdirected with the other hand, jerking his goblet to draw attention so that no one would notice what he'd done." He shook his head in disbelief. "The duke never moved."

I dug into the king's purse and pressed another gold coin into the juggler's hand so that no one else in the hall could see. Without a word, he left his blocks and ball and departed.

The strains of music drew my attention back to the throne room, sounds that faded a moment later as the pulse of my heartbeat roared through my ears. On the king's dais, a servant detached himself from the shadows, a man twin to the hired blade who had followed Custos and me from the library, were it not for the horizontal scar on his forehead.

I stepped through the crowd unmindful of any I bumped, searching in vain for the chamberlain. Jeb's friend was nowhere to be seen. Aer in heaven, had I been discovered? Weaving through the press of nobles in their finery, I struggled to intercept Laidir's killer as he approached the king. Those eight paces were all that separated him from death.

"Servant!" A man stepped into my path, his goblet thrust at me.

Six paces.

I looked up to see one of Orlan's men, his face leering and his eyes filled with the knowledge of who I was.

Four paces.

I tossed the flagon at him and stepped to one side, drawing the dagger from its sheath in my boot. The moment I threw it, my life was forfeit.

But even if I missed, the king might live the night. Three paces. I cocked my arm and prayed I didn't hit Laidir by mistake. The stitches along my back broke loose, and I gasped in pain as the blade flew from my hand.

"MURDER!"

The court froze at Lady Gael's scream.

I watched my dagger tumble end over end toward the assassin. The king's guards saw the flash of reflected light and put a ring of flesh and steel around Laidir. To his left, the man with the scar ducked, the dagger flying over his head by a hand's breadth.

But instead of dropping the flagon of wine, he clutched it close.

All eyes turned to me. In front of me Orlan's man paused, his eyes darting before he backed away. From one side the duke and the marquis drew their weapons and advanced.

"You dare to threaten the king?" The duke's voice filled the hall with righteous indignation. The point of his sword, bright and fatal, led his charge.

But Lady Gael got to me first. "Beware, Your Grace," Gael's voice echoed from the buttresses. "He carries a second dagger."

Numbed by betrayal, I stood as she stepped close, tugging at my cloak to pull the dagger and my last chance to save the king from its hiding place up my sleeve.

The duke and the marquis came within sword reach, their points tracing lazy figure eights over the floor. Lady Gael retreated to stand with the man who owned her allegiance.

"My lord," she curtsied, "this man is no servant."

The duke smiled, his eyes gleaming and raised his hand to strike.

On the dais, the king's guards surrounded him, preventing his advance. Perhaps I imagined the look of pity he sent my way.

The marquis stood within reach. I had one last duty to perform.

Two of Orlan's men seized me, forcing me to the floor for execution, but I'd trained in the last war. I pivoted to my left, wrapping my arm around the guard's and then straightening it as I kicked out at the other guard.

A soft cracking sound accompanied a scream as the guard's shoulder popped its socket. The guard on my right didn't go down, but the kick had landed where I wanted.

But I wasn't gifted. A swarm of bodies rushed at me.

The duke's scream cut through our struggle. "He's mine!"

Blows to my ribs forced the air from my lungs, and I struggled to breathe as spots swam in my vision. But no one drew steel. I curled, reaching for the vial I'd taken from Myle's workshop thinking to hurl the contents at Orlan, knowing I would never live long enough to question him.

I groped for it, and though wetness soaked my hand and pocket, the poison Myle and Lady Gael had used on me was absent, as if it

had never been. All that remained was a stain on my cloak pocket and the smell of lemongrass.

Victory lit the duke's eyes.

"Before I kill you, servant," the duke said. "I'd like to know your purpose here." He glanced toward the throne in triumph.

The room spun, and I swallowed trying to lock my words behind my mouth, but Myle's potion proved too powerful a lever. "I came to kill your brother."

The duke's beautiful face knotted in scorn, and a gasp of laughter prefaced his smile of disbelief.

"It's true, Your Grace," Lady Gael said. She turned to the duke's brother, presenting him with the rondel I'd hidden up my sleeve. Then I noticed her hands, wet in the lamplight. She wavered on her feet and locked her knees.

Panic lit the marquis's eyes, and he dropped the dagger before he darted forward, weaving, sword raised. I gulped air as I saw his arm tense in preparation for the blow that would sever me from life.

"Name your gifts!" I screamed at him.

I saw him gape, struggling to focus, to complete the stroke. His lips quivered as if they no longer obeyed his will. The hall stilled, waiting for blood.

"Craft," the marquis said. Horror replaced the gleam of triumph. I struggled to rise, but the weight of the duke's men still kept me pinned to the floor.

"Be silent," one of them hissed. I ducked, catching the blow meant for my mouth on the top of my head.

"Beauty," the marquis said in a whisper.

"Louder!" I screamed.

"Parts!"

Hands dropped away from me as if my captors had become mere phantoms.

"Again," I ordered.

Space cleared around the marquis, who stood reciting the gifts he'd stolen, each followed by half a dozen heartbeats as he struggled for silence. By the time he got to Helps, the king stood

within half a dozen paces, still ringed by the naked steel of his guards.

I walked to Lady Gael, who stood gazing at the duke, playing the part of dutiful vassal to the last. But she offered the dagger to me hilt first, and her eyes were a clear, clear blue. Not slate.

Hatred burned in the eyes of Orlan's men, all of them, but they cleared a path for me and backed away from the marquis as if he'd become leprous. I gripped the dagger for an overhand strike. The king and the church required no further evidence. From the moment the marquis admitted to having more than one gift, his life had ended. Yet I wanted to ensure no condemnation could ever come against Lady Gael.

And a part of me, a very large part, wanted to humble his brother, the duke. "How many gifts have you stolen?"

Somewhere deep behind his eyes, I saw the marquis unmask an unquenchable pride. "Five." Unmindful of the king, he turned to his brother, the duke, his face twisting into an expression of unalloyed disdain. "Almost, you knelt to me."

I stepped forward.

"Since you do not have it, let me show you what devotion looks like," I said. The marquis died before he hit the floor. I followed his body and my dagger down as his eyes emptied, my own strange compulsion coming over me. "Tell me, Orlan," I said, "what do you see?" The marquis didn't answer— his gaze, locked on something impossibly far away, never shifted.

Murmurs and whispered threats brought me back to myself, and I stood to see the lords and ladies of the realm staring at me, their expressions a mixture of fear and loathing.

Someone might have called my name, but I never looked back as I fled from their presence.

I hid that night in the warrens of the poor quarter, not quite afraid, but wary of placing myself where any of the Orlan family could find me. Rory accepted my token and gave me a corner where I curled myself into my cloak on the hard-packed earth and slept the dreamless sleep of the blessed. By the time I woke the sun made steep shadows against the threshold of the abandoned root cellar.

Jeb found me wandering the streets two hours after noon, his tongue rougher than a tanner's blade. "Curse your wormy guts, Dura. The entire city watch has been looking for you since last night." He punctuated his words with cracks from each knuckle.

"I was hiding."

"Ha," he snorted. "Can't fault you there, but you've hidden from the king as well, and he wants to see you." He peered at the sun. "You've kept him waiting for over half a day now." He laughed. "That's the kind of thing that usually puts him in foul humor. Or so I'm told." He turned his back as if he expected me to follow. "I have horses at the next street."

She stood at the main entrance to the tor without giving the appearance of waiting, but I couldn't divine any reason for her to be there. I chided that thought for the hope and arrogance within it. Lady Gael had no further reason to speak with me.

Even so, I dismounted and came into her presence, bowing as Jeb muttered ineffective curses behind me. "How did you know it was the marquis and not the duke who'd stolen others' gifts?"

She smiled. "I didn't, but when I saw you talking to the juggler, you wore a look of surprise, so I waited."

Her explanation did nothing to answer my deeper questions, questions that had nothing to do with the duke or his treasonous brother. "How did you know I carried Myle's potion with me?"

Her eyes might have darkened a shade. "I listened to your words, master reeve. You said 'Confession or not, the duke must die.' I took

that to mean you'd brought the poison with you."

I found myself wondering exactly what gifts, talents, and temperaments she possessed, that she could read me so clearly.

"I owe you a debt, my lady."

If I had expected humility or self-deprecation, I would have been disappointed.

"You do," she nodded. She gazed at me without offering to explain her actions or motives. "The question becomes how you intend to repay it."

Her tone hinted at possibilities that escaped me. "What can the least of Bunard's reeves offer to one of the highborn?"

"The least of reeves can offer me nothing I want." She smiled, and the rich hue of her eyes, startling beneath her dark lashes, held me immobile until Jeb barked my name.

Dirty and reeking from my night in the poor quarter, I came into the king's private audience chamber. Laidir watched me from his seat on the low dais, his guards posted at the points of the compass around him, waiting for his orders. I knelt with my gaze locked to the floor. Only the six of us occupied the silence that filled his chamber.

"How did you get him to confess?" Laidir's voice vibrated against my skin as well as my ears, deep enough so that I heard it as distinct rumbles from some mythical lute string.

I dared to raise my head and look him in the eye. "Alchemy, Your Majesty."

Thoughts and consequences swirled behind his hazel stare. "Dangerous," he said.

"Yes, Your Majesty, but the formula is unwritten, and the alchemist will not release it."

"And you trust him in this?" Laidir asked.

I tried to hide my shock at the king's question and all that it implied, but I put a hand to the floor to steady myself even so. "I do."

"There is much to discuss," Laidir said. For a moment his eyes grew serious, even grave. "I find myself in need of eyes and ears besides those of the castellan and his lieutenants, someone outside

the tor, closer to the peoples of the city." He paused. "Someone familiar with the cursed forest. First, tell me what you want."

A memory of black-leaved oak trees intruded upon my vision, and I shook my head to clear it. "Your Majesty?" I shook my head in confusion.

"You've done a service to me and, I would like to think, the kingdom," Laidir said. "Orlan's rule would have been hard. What recompense do you desire, Willet Dura?"

I couldn't help but smile. Hope, unimagined before now, flared in my chest. The denizens of the poor quarter had taught me how to bargain closely. "What are my options, Your Majesty?"

"Ha!" Laidir laughed. "Well spoken, but you will not catch me so easily. I've read the same parables you have. There will be no offer of half my kingdom."

I bowed and this time I let my heart speak before my mind could stop it. "I want the hand of Lady Gael, Your Majesty."

"Strange, considering her oaths of fealty to the Orlan family," he said. I saw him tilt his head, and his eyes twinkled as if I'd passed some test only he knew. "Done, though your request requires more of me than you know."

He came forward, closing the gap between us, and before I could register his intention, drew his blade and touched the flat of his sword to my lips. Then he returned to his seat, leaning forward as his eyes shone like a child's in expectation of a present. "Now, *Lord Dura*, rise and tell me the tale!"

Keep reading for a special sample of *The Shock of Night*—book one in THE DARKWATER SAGA series by Patrick W. Carr.

Excerpt from *The Shock of Night.*

# Prologue

Elwin stopped at the edge of the forest, his eyes scanning the trees for any movement that might presage an attack, though the man at his right, Robin, would surely be doing the same and better than he. Still, no one living stood in a better position than he to appreciate their danger. Within the shadowed canopy of twisted black-leaved trees nothing stirred. No bird called its summer cry, no squirrel foraged the floor, no fox hunted.

Elwin almost touched the sliver of metal tucked away in his cloak, stopping just short of brushing the shiny yellow fragment of aurium as if to confirm its impossible existence.

"A blacksmith," he muttered.

Robin turned from his inspection of the cursed forest to give him a questioning look. "Eldest?"

For a moment he considered brushing aside the invitation to explain, but Robin's insight had proven valuable before, despite his youth. "The dead man back there was a blacksmith. Soot marked the scars of old burns on his hands and his clothes still held the smell of fire and quenching oil." Elwin tapped his cloak pocket where the shard of metal rested, the man's death sentence had he not already been dead. "That still doesn't explain how he managed to survive as long as he did."

Robin nodded. "How does a blacksmith come to be in possession of aurium?"

Elwin nodded and then shook his head. "How does anyone come to possess the forbidden metal?"

They continued riding north, their horses ascending out of the fertile valley stretching east and west that marked the border between Owmead and the northernmost kingdom on the continent, Collum. The question lay between them, unanswered, like the death

of a patriarch no one dared mention, but they'd left the torn and mauled body of the blacksmith behind as a warning, according to the law of the kingdoms that bordered the Darkwater Forest.

They kept to its edge of the forest as the landscape grew rockier, defying the efforts of those who farmed it. After another mile, Robin pointed. "There. Another one," he said in a tone of voice like the crushing of rock.

The mound of torn and matted fur, buzzing with flies in the sun, brought a surge of bile to Elwin's throat, and he looked away to bring his stomach under control. "Check it," he ordered in a voice that sounded hollow and strangely far away.

Tying a strip of cloth across his mouth and nose, Robin dismounted. The flies shifted at his approach—and for a moment, Elwin's guard wore a dark halo—but no other carrion eaters defiled the carcass. The body of the sentinel, larger than a wolf by half and more heavily muscled as well, had been left untouched this close to the forest. The sentinels sparked fear even in death.

Elwin nodded to himself—animals were wise in such things. He saw Robin's chest rise and fall in a sigh even before he turned from the body.

"Like the others," Robin said. "It bled to death. There are cuts all over it." He stooped to pull the lips back from the muzzle, its triangular shape a testimony to the power in the jaws. "Clean. Whoever killed it managed to do so without taking any injuries."

With a mental wrench that rose almost to the level of physical pain, Elwin abandoned another hope. Fantasies and delusions would no longer help them. "Could you do such a thing, Robin?"

To anyone else the question might have sounded like an accusation. That Robin had never left his side since becoming his protector cast the query in a different light. His guard cocked his head, his eyes growing distant, and Elwin knew he fought the beast at his feet within his mind, playing stroke and parry before answering. "Yes," he said finally. "But not alone."

"Are you saying there is someone out there better than you?" Elwin asked.

Thankfully, his guard shook his head, leaving him one of his few remaining hopes. “No. Some of the wounds on the sentinel are on the back flanks and legs. I would think three or four men attacked it. I do not think any one of them to be my equal.”

He caught the slight emphasis on *think* and tried to keep the surprise from his face, but Robin had only paused.

“I wouldn’t want to come up against these men without my brothers to help. They’re certainly gifted.”

Elwin growled a curse that had nothing to do with his time in the priesthood of the Merum order. “Or something like it. That’s a half dozen sentinel deaths in the past year. We don’t have the replacements.” He tapped the sliver of aurium in his pocket and looked at the forest as if the trees might uproot themselves and attack there in the noonday sun. “Faran can’t keep up. It takes years to breed and train a sentinel.” Despair clogged Elwin’s throat, and for a moment it broke free of his ability to contain it. “I wish Cesla were here.”

Robin turned away at the mention of Elwin’s brother, unwilling, perhaps, to intrude upon the grief that still seemed so recent. “What of his gift?” he asked softly.

Elwin nodded in approval. His guard possessed a talent for knowing others in addition to his more obvious physical ones. Descending into that familiar grief wouldn’t serve them. “We follow the trail as best we can,” he sighed. “Sometimes I think we did our job too well. We’ve hidden ourselves so completely that the gift becomes difficult to find if it goes free.” He patted a pocket. “But there’s a rumor from the village of Cryos.”

“Convenient,” Robin said without explaining.

Elwin nodded. “Yes, we can visit Faran and see if there is any way he can replenish the sentinels more quickly.” The thought of the journey north wearied him. He carried too many memories, and his mind bowed beneath their weight, like a wagon axle trying to support too many bags of grain.

Elwin held out his hands to survey them in the muted sunlight that filtered through the cloud cover. The prominent veins and the skin, as thin as the papery outer layer of an onion, still surprised him. “I’m

almost ready to move on, Robin. I've used the gift too often, and now it's used me up."

The sentinel lying dead at their feet brought a surge of anger, and he straightened in his saddle. "But before I go, I think I'd like to bring justice to the men who did this."

He twitched the reins, and they rode northwest, following a trail only he could sense, deeper into the kingdom of Collum.

# Chapter 1

**The Twentieth Year of King Laidir's Reign**

The pounding on my door pulled me from slumber, and I drifted toward waking like a piece of sodden wood floating toward the surface of a lake. I had one hand on the door latch and the other clutching a dagger behind my back before I managed to get both eyes open. A guard, one of the king's by his dress, stood outside next to Gareth, one of the night constables. I snuck a glance out the window. The glass in my quarters wasn't of sufficient quality to offer me anything more than an impression of what lay beyond, but I could tell the sun wasn't up yet.

The remnants of some dream I didn't want to remember cracked my voice. "What?"

The guard gave me an almost imperceptible bob of his head. My title was the least in Laidir's court. "You're needed, Lord Dura."

I tried to keep my temper in check. My unique position in service to the king seemed to require the same hours as a midwife's. "What about Jeb?" I asked, mentioning the chief reeve, the one who should have been awakened instead of me.

Gareth shook his head. "We thought we should wake you first. There's been a killing in the merchants' quarter."

A thread of panic shot through my chest, as if someone had filled my heart with ice, but I kept my gaze on Gareth with an effort. What had I dreamed? I kept my voice steady and played the part of the interrupted sleeper as best I could. "So? What's so dire about some fool shopkeeper who can't keep his money safeguarded?"

Gareth's plain soldier's face lost what little expression it held. "It's a churchman."

I stifled my next comment and turned back into the apartment the king provided me as a lord in his employ to get dressed. It took me a moment to realize I already was. Only my cloak and boots were lacking. Another surge of panic brought me to full wakefulness, and I moved quickly to prevent the guards from entering at my delay. I lit a candle and spotted my cloak lying across a chair on the far side of the room. I crossed over and lifted it.

An oath crossed my lips before I could prevent it at seeing spots of blood on the hem. I rolled it into a bundle and shoved it beneath the armoire before retrieving another and picking up my weapon. All of the city's reeves wore a sword, but most of them didn't expect trouble. I seemed to attract it like a lodestone drew iron. I moved to a small stand and tucked a pair of daggers into leather pouches stitched into the back of my belt and slid another into the inside of my right boot. Then I tried to reconcile myself to being awake before dawn.

Jeb ran the city watch and did it well. If it came to brawling or persuading some poor unfortunate to confess, Jeb's methods yielded results. His fists served as a fair approximation of iron and he enjoyed using them to convince people to mend the error of their ways. It was amazing how the sound of his knuckles popping loosened a man's tongue.

But murder presented a different challenge, particularly one without witnesses or one involving people of importance. Jeb's persuasion couldn't quicken the tongues of the dead, which explained Gareth's presence at my door. And I had proven my worth to the king. A year prior, I'd had the mixed fortune of solving a crime that earned me his favor. Over the objections of the rest of the nobility, the king raised me to lordship, though without lands or gift. I became the least in his service. My current duties were the price I paid for my nobility and another reward he'd given that I esteemed more highly.

We exited the halls of King Laidir's stronghold and came out onto one of the blocky staircases that led downward, descending the

massive tor on which it had been built, carved from gut rock. Enormous granite stones merged with the mountain that defined the ponderous edifice of Laidir's seat. The vertical walls were high enough to be impervious to ladders, and the surrounding landscape made it difficult to bring siege engines close enough to do any real damage.

The massive city of Bunard, King Laidir's seat of power, spread beneath us. The Rinwash curved around the stronghold to the north and west, but branches of the river had been diverted to supply water to each quarter of the city. If the sun had been up I could have seen the bridges connecting each section of the city, but in the darkness only the ends were visible, illuminated by the watch fires at each bank.

I followed Gareth downward until we arrived at the king's stables, the smell of horse strong in the still air of the morning. Mounting quickly, we set out for the merchants' quarter as the sky showed hints of slate in the east, riding southwest, passing by the four massive cathedrals of the divisions of the church, each with their criers' stand out front—thankfully empty. I appreciated the silence. By the time I returned, the day's chosen lector would be out front, declaring each division's interpretation of the Word for the unbelieving.

After crossing the first bridge, we rode through the opulence of those living nearest His Majesty, structures just short of castles, with broad sweeping arches and stained-glass ballrooms. The scarcity of land precluded the types of formal grounds many of them maintained in their holdings, but their meticulously groomed gardens exuded wealth and order just the same.

They were as welcoming as iron.

We crossed the next bridge over the Rinwash, heading into the high merchants' quarter and turned south, passing homes nearly the equal of the nobility, though they lacked the space for private gardens and they held about themselves the concentrated energy of those focused on profit.

When we later passed over the next bridge, the buildings changed from heavy-cut granite to wood, first with several stories, then with

just two or one, their plain windows already glowing as those within began preparations for their day in the marketplace or at their craft. The ring of a hammer started somewhere off to my right, and the smell of bread drifted to me, reminding me I'd yet to eat.

Gareth took the opportunity our travel afforded to provide what little information he had around mouthfuls of dark bread. "We found two men, one dead from blood loss, the other nearly so." His mouth pulled to one side beneath a nose that had been broken so many times that it changed directions often. "A seamstress heard the clash of steel and started screaming, but by the time the night watch arrived, the attackers had fled."

I logged Gareth's pithy summary away. My heart beat faster with each step closer, and the abstraction I felt in the presence of the dead commanded my attention. I concentrated long enough to ask a proper question. "Do you have any names?"

He nodded. "The watchman recognized them. The dead man is Robin. He's the menial of Elwin, the man who got hit on the head. They're Servants."

I pulled the mist of predawn into my lungs and squinted through the darkness. Some might resent the studied aloofness of a Merum priest or the zeal of the Vanguard, and others might even take exception to the aggressive mercy practiced by the Absold. But no one in their right mind begrudged a Servant. They didn't preach, wouldn't fight or try to change anyone. They served others. But for some reason, two men of the most humble of the four orders on the continent had been killed. My heart quickened again.

We rounded a corner and came to the edge of a small grassy area bordering a clump of plain wooden buildings that looked as if they were huddling against the dark. A stone wall about eight feet high separated the area from the bank of one of the branches of the Rinwash River.

Gareth pointed to a pile of limbs and cloth sprawled against the base of the wall. Here and there pale white skin showed against stone or fabric. Dark wet blotches covered the tunic. Gaping wounds assaulted my vision as the smell of blood hit my nose, and I fought to keep the remnants of my last meal in place. Gareth said

something that almost penetrated the spell cast by the dead man, but none of the words registered as important.

I ignored him. Distraction was the enemy. Death begets death, and my job was to bring the killers to the gallows. I knew one thing immediately—Robin had been taken down by at least two men, maybe more. Deep slashes on his legs that matched those on his torso testified to as much. A single fighter would never risk a low-line attack that way. I pulled a breath heavy with mist off the river into my lungs as I counted the wounds. "They didn't just kill him—they cut him to pieces." Even his face. "How did anyone recognize him?"

Gareth shrugged. "I asked Ahden that same question. He recognized Robin's clothes and the chip in his front tooth—and knows of his service to Elwin."

I bent and shifted the hair to see his eye. I signaled Gareth closer with his torch. The details of death and the shadowed surroundings faded as I gave myself to Robin's stare. So like the others I had seen at the end, regardless of the why or how of their passing. His eyes—a startling blue, like a potter's glaze—focused on something so impossibly far away in death that he appeared to see through me, the city, and the kingdom. Even the stars were too close to capture his attention. A familiar longing awoke in me at the sight of it, and I desired nothing more in that moment than to somehow pull his attention from eternity so that he might answer my question. "Tell me, Robin, what do you see?"

Robin didn't answer, of course. I was too late, as I always was.

"Milord?"

Gareth's voice pulled me from myself. He stood with the torch, shifting his weight from foot to foot, discomfited. No wisdom had been forthcoming from Robin, just as none had come to me from my family, the duke's brother, or countless others. "Scan the area, Gareth. Tell me what you find."

He wandered from spot to spot on the grounds, careful to avoid touching the body or disturbing the scuff marks in the turf where the earth bore witness. I turned from the pull of Robin's gaze with an effort and climbed the steps to the top of the wall, my mind split

between trying to understand what lay before me and worry. There'd been blood on my cloak.

From my elevated vantage point, the extremity of Robin's defense became clear. The grass, trampled by the attack, flowed back and forth like the strokes of a painter. My experience in battle didn't rival Gareth's, but even I could see Robin had fought bravely and well, very well. That last fact struck me, and I stopped to consider its implications. Too well for a Servant.

I descended the heavy granite steps, my breath misting the air before me. Gareth stepped to my side. The presence of Robin's corpse didn't prevent him from munching on his bread, his face impassive. "Reminds me of the last border war. Even after the bodies had been hauled off and burned, you could tell where the worst of the fighting was by looking at the grass. Rough business. Robin didn't go down without a fight. He gave as good as he got, or nearly so."

I nodded to acknowledge Gareth's confirmation and reminded myself I only had three more months of duty as the head of the city watch. After my marriage to Gael, I would be more elevated among the nobility that despised me. I blew air through my hands trying to warm them. "What do you see?"

He smiled at the chance to display his veteran's knowledge once more. "Come. I'll show you." He led me toward a patch of earth. "Trace the scuff marks." He bent. "See how the grass is bent and torn, pointing toward the river. Robin and Elwin were backing away with a pair of men following. There's a bit of blood here. Robin's, I think, because just after you can see the scuffs turn a bit. I think Robin was trying to protect his wounded side. And then we come to this." Gareth pointed to a pair of bloody splotches on the ground. "See the space between there and here? Both Robin and his assailants found their mark." My lieutenant knelt and touched the grass. "They all struck hard."

Two puddles of deep vermillion, almost black in the predawn, perhaps a foot in diameter discolored the earth, perhaps a cupful, maybe two. "It doesn't look like so much."

Gareth shook his head. “When a man’s bleeding through his clothes and moving, Lord Dura, this is enough to kill.”

I nodded, convinced. He pointed at another spot between us and the body a few feet away. “Robin got marked again.”

We traced and read the desperation of Robin’s defeat written in splashes of blood on the ground until we stood over him once more. A few feet away to Robin’s left the grass had been flattened and a sluggish pool of blood marked one end of the spot. I knelt, searching the ground under the yellow light of Gareth’s torch. Droplets of blood littered the grass, smudges really.

“This is where they found Elwin?”

Gareth nodded, but something seemed wrong. Elwin should have been behind Robin, but from the scuffs in the grass and the blood spatters, it appeared he’d been out to one side or possibly in front when his enemies took him. “Why would he be here?” I muttered, not meaning for my voice to carry, but Gareth heard me anyway.

“Men do strange things in the rush of battle, my lord.”

My misgiving remained despite my silence. “Is there anything else?”

Gareth led me to a spot several paces away, pointing to a pair of shallow grooves on the ground running parallel to each other. “Someone was dragged away.”

This was why I needed Gareth. Whatever he lacked in insight or intuition, he made up for in observation. With ten years more experience in the king’s service, he’d seen enough dying to make him an expert, but the stares of the dead held no interest for him.

I retraced the track of Robin’s struggle over to his body, where I rolled him over and searched his clothes. A heavy jingle drew my attention, and I cut his purse free and dumped the contents. My pulse quickened once more as a glint of yellow, so rare as to be almost illegal, tumbled into my hand.

I almost stood then, but something about the rents in Robin’s clothing stopped me. I’d been in the last border war and had seen plenty of dead and injured, but the holes in his tunic and breeches were unique in their similarity. I examined a pair of wounds on his

right thigh before unfastening the buttons of his coat and lifting his shirt to inspect the damage on his stomach and chest.

I shifted the body to get a better look. Whoever had cut him up had tried to kill him quickly and obviously failed. I probed one of the wounds on his chest. A slash, not a thrust, about a hand wide ran horizontally, or nearly so, across Robin's right side, the wound much deeper in the center than either side. Curious, I checked a couple more, then compared them to the wounds on his thighs. Every wound appeared the same, a clean cut nearly a hand wide and almost as deep. They looked like sword or dagger slashes, but something about the depth bothered me—like a face that should have been familiar but wasn't—and I stared, trying to place it.

Robin's fist still clenched a sword, and there was blood on the blade. By the light of Gareth's torch, I inspected the nicks on the edges. No, not nicks, something else. Nicks from sword parries left small triangular notches in the edge of a blade. Instead, Robin's blade had small arc-shaped dents, as if he'd tried to hack through the bars of a prison. I tucked his sword into my belt, behind my own.

"Interesting."

Gareth looked at me as if I'd surprised him. "Lord Dura?"

I buttoned Robin's coat, my movements as respectful as I could make them. This was why I was here. Despite Gareth's experience, he lacked the ability to extrapolate his observations. "You say Robin marked a man badly enough to kill. Yet there's no one else here. And his purse was full, very full."

I shook the purse and noted the clear ring of silver along with a richer sound I'd rarely heard. "So that leaves us with a set of attackers who have no interest in money and whose identities are so important they're willing to spend the time and effort necessary to drag away a dead man."

I pointed a finger at Robin, as if I could accuse him of something that would matter. "He was a Servant of all things. They don't fight. They don't strike back when struck. Who kills a Servant?" At this point Robin's death didn't bother me nearly as much as his occupation.

“People kill for all sorts of reasons,” Gareth said. “Not all of them make sense.”

The education I received before becoming a reeve gave me a perspective on history. In the life of the church, I knew just how short a few hundred years could be. The Order Wars represented a long and lurid part of history on the northern continent. No sane man would ever wish their return, but the Servants had refused to fight, even then. I sighed. “Does the king know about this?”

Gareth nodded his head. “If he doesn’t, he soon will. The castellan was writing his report when I came to get you.”

Tension crept its way up the back of my neck, and I kept myself from sampling Gareth’s soldierly vocabulary, barely. The best I could say about the new castellan was that he didn’t come from the Orlan family. Being gifted, he’d never gone to war and didn’t have the experience to understand the kind of violence Robin’s death represented. I’d served in the last fight with Owmead almost a decade ago. A stab of pain shot through my head at the memory.

I focused on the scene before me. Blood soaked the earth and stones like spilled communal wine. What I saw made me wince, but it wasn’t the violence or the blood. “Where’s Elwin?”

Gareth made a vague gesture with his hand toward the southwest. “They took him to the House of Passing.”

I chewed my lip. Elwin had been wounded in the attack and survived it, at least temporarily. But instead of taking him to the succor of his order, the city watch had taken him out to the House of Passing. “He’s a churchman. Why didn’t they take him to a healer? For that matter, why didn’t they take him to the Servant’s cathedral? They’re the best healers in Bunard.”

I led Gareth back to where I’d tied up my mount, my pace urgent. I needed to see Elwin’s body, and if the slim chance remained that he still lived, I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to question him or witness his passing. “Has anyone else come forward as a witness?”

Gareth snorted. “In this part of the city? No sir. These aren’t the type of people that take an interest in another’s business.”

His reply failed to discourage me. There were more witnesses—they would just be harder to get to. Nothing happened in the city of Bunard without someone seeing. The observers might not be the type the king's magistrates would hearken to, but they were there. Whether they were beggars, pickpockets, thieves, or prostitutes, someone had seen the attack.

"I'll be married in three months, Gareth, my year of betrothal completed, the husband of a lady and a man with responsibilities within the nobility." I spoke to my fear. "I'll learn the work of a respectable lord."

Gareth blew air through his lips. "Why would the king allow that? There's no one else that has your talent for seeing the way of things."

I shook my head. There was no use in putting it off. Gareth might not be able to see the problem, but the king would, and I'd learned firsthand the difficulty of shading the truth with him in any way. Gareth would have to make report for me. "How long has Robin been in the city, Gareth?"

He shrugged and took another bite of bread. Dark crumbs littered his pale beard. "About five years."

"What were a church functionary and his helper doing out at night? How does a menial Servant come by the skill to fight more than one opponent and kill one of them? Did you see his wounds?" I tried not to leer at the memory of his stare. "He bled to death. Against two or more swords, intent on killing him, he bled to death, meaning they weren't good enough to land a killing stroke against a *Servant*."

I turned a slow circle, searching out the closest buildings. This section of town was home to many of the shopkeepers, those less-prosperous merchants who worked without ceasing but managed to maintain their status. Most of the buildings close by housed the proprietor's business in the front and their living space in the back. Some few possessed a second story. I pointed them out. "Start with those. A few of them would have a view of the fight. We need information." I didn't bother sending Gareth after those who filled the shadows of the city at night. They'd never speak with him.

Skittish, sometimes they wouldn't even talk to me. I nodded toward the dead man. "And have someone take care of Robin."

# Chapter 2

I pushed Dest to a gallop in the hope of reaching Elwin before he died. I knew the place and the path well enough to make the trip in the dark. The House of Passing sat in its crevice between the hills like a gateway to eternity against the banks of the Ende River. The rocky path to it was lined with flowers, even in the winter, flaunting their colors—blue, yellow, or pink, but never red. The preceptors of the dead never allowed the color of blood.

Those who were gifted didn't always use it for a profit. Some, out of conscience or guilt, used their gift in the service of the church, mostly those with the gift of Helps. I couldn't imagine the effort it took to grow flowers in the winter, no matter how talented they might be with nature, but I was grateful for it just the same. The trip to the House of Passing was often the most beautiful the dying ever took.

Laidir funded the house out of the taxes levied on the four orders so that our city might have a place to send the dying no one wished to care for. The religious orders resented the tax, enough so that some had attempted to refuse payment, but the Vanguard had been forcibly disbanded and expelled for a year when they'd tried. The loss in revenue, and souls, of course, became unacceptable. Everyone paid promptly from then on.

No one order ran the house. It seemed death was one of the few things the four could agree on. The expanded structure had grown along with the city until it boasted two levels and four wings. Rich green grass surrounded the stone edifice and more flowers created a

carpet of brilliant blue and yellow against the stolid backdrop of masonry.

As I approached, light fog rolled in from the river behind the house, shrouding the landscape in tendrils of mist that brushed the stone pier with ghostly caresses. In the gray of predawn I could see half-a-dozen flat-bottomed coracles, each a little wider than I was tall, stacked beneath a simple shed. After someone passed, the brothers or sisters would say the antidon in the tradition of their order. Usually the dead were buried or burned, according to the tradition.

But every now and then the old beliefs sprang forth and the dying requested the journey west in their attempt to join the mythical Fayit, the eldritch beings who'd supposedly walked the earth before Aer created man.

The brothers and sisters in the House would load the body into the coracle and send it down the Ende, which meandered through the lowlands to the west, without falls or rapids, until it emptied into the Western Sea. From there the current caught it and carried it toward the setting sun and into the unknown.

I pulled my attention back to the house. The brothers and sisters who worked there volunteered in turns from the segments of the church that resided within our kingdom. They all had cause to know me. A candle shone in the window to the left and a shadow moved within. Care for the dying didn't follow a merchant's schedule. I checked the moon. It wouldn't be full for another seven days.

I dismounted and stopped, my ears straining. An echo of sound, the distant crunch of gravel beneath a hoof, came to me, but dawn still lay some minutes away, and I could make nothing out except the dim outlines of the trees lining the path. My heart worked against my ribs, and I pulled my sword and backed my way into the torchlight of the stone entryway.

Geoffrey, wearing the white arm bands of the Vanguard and carrying the smell of death on his clothes, greeted me just inside the door. He gave me a polite nod and a heavy-lidded blink that always took a split second longer than it should have.

"Lord Dura. I wondered when you would return to us." The subtle note of disapproval in his voice drifted to my ears as if he had to bribe the air to carry it to me. "Jocelyn has been asking after you. None of the other visitors will read the tales to her it seems." He paused to check the moon. "She's trying to make it to the next festival of Bas-solas. She's close, but I'm not sure she'll make it. You'll wish to escort her, I assume?"

My head had nodded assent before I remembered why I had come. I'd escorted a dozen or more of the residents of the House to the threshold of eternity, reading them their favorite story or holding their hand, each time waiting to catch some hint of what they saw as they stepped through the door to forever. So far their blank stares defied me, refusing to surrender the knowledge. I hoped someday one of those passing to the other side would return long enough to give me some hint. I'd heard of it happening in tales and rumors until I thirsted for it like a man in the desert. Geoffrey's disapproval failed to shame me, my need was too great.

"I can't read to her," I said. "At least not now. I'm here on the king's business. A man was brought to you a couple of hours ago. He's probably passed, but I'll need to see the body."

Geoffrey's eyes almost sharpened into interest, and he turned, crisp, like a soldier toward the east wing. "I'll take you to him. He's still alive, though we are at a loss to understand it. Sister Iselle believes he may pull through despite his grievous injury." He sighed, a whisper of sound that carried mourning in it, though I knew from experience it wouldn't be for the dying. "Her duties here weigh heavily upon her. She hopes and prays for each resident's recovery." His shoulders shifted beneath his cassock. "Servants often have difficulty with death. The Vanguard know better."

I followed him into a long ward with a row of plain elevated beds on each side of a wide aisle running the length of the room. Cries filled the air, and I stutter-stepped at the unfamiliar sound. People didn't suffer pain in the House—the brothers and sisters were skilled at easing it. We passed by a number of men whose injuries had fouled past the healer's art, and the smell of infection hung heavy in

the air despite the vinegar used to mask it. Then we came to the source of the cries.

Elwin, his head swathed in several feet of blood-soaked bandages, tossed on his bed, his back reflexing in arced tension, like a man caught in fever dreams, his head shaking from side to side. Sister Iselle stood over him with her weight forward, calling encouragements, trying to calm him, but each time she reached out to him, he flinched, recoiling from the prospect of her touch.

Disappointment settled onto my shoulders like a cloak. The blow to his head hadn't killed him yet, but there would be no information coming from Elwin. "How long has he been like this?"

Geoffrey shrugged. "It can't have been long. He was unconscious just a few moments ago."

Elwin's eyes opened, but his gaze passed through his surroundings with the stare of the unseeing. Then his arm reached toward me.

Iselle followed the gesture, her blue eyes shining in a heart-shaped face that would make most men jealous of the church she served and resentful of the vows of celibacy her order required. She straightened to face me, her expression welcoming but tinged with sorrow as always. "Willet, it is good to see you again." She glanced at Elwin. "You've always done so well with the passing. Do you think you can calm him? If we could get him to rest, he might recover. I'm hopeful—"

"Sister Iselle, you know that—"

"We do not know the future, Brother Geoffrey." She thrust her chin in defiance toward Geoffrey and his condescension. "No one dies until they have breathed their last." She faced me, her arm beckoning.

I stepped toward the bed. As much as I disliked Geoffrey, I couldn't help but agree with him. Elwin's soaked bandages stated plainly he would die from blood loss even if the blow didn't kill him. I saw now why the watch, peopled with veterans from the last war, hadn't bothered the healers. They'd recognized the certainty of Elwin's death.

He stilled as I approached, the arc in his back easing and his arms coming to rest on the blankets. I couldn't help but sigh at his

passing. For a moment I had dared to hope I might be able to question him.

I turned back to Geoffrey and Iselle. "I'm sorry. I'll need to search him." I shook my head. "And I'll have to look at the wound as well." Geoffrey gave me another of his slow blinks and a nod I would have expected from any of the Vanguard, but Iselle turned from me, scattering tears.

Starting at Elwin's feet, I worked my way up, feeling along his legs for anything he might have tried to keep hidden. Nothing beyond the bony ranginess of an old man came to me, until I came to his cloak. A lump made of tight layers of cloth lay within a small pocket stitched to the inside. I took it and tucked it into my belt, waiting for a more opportune and private time to see what I had.

When I looked up, Elwin's dead stare caught me, and I placed my mouth close to the bandages covering one ear. "Elwin, can you tell me what you see?"

He didn't answer, of course, and silence settled over the room once more. I shifted my feet in preparation to unwrap the bandages on his head.

Elwin's body convulsed, lurching forward, and he grasped my head, the nails digging into my flesh. "Domere!"

The room tilted and went black.

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**Patrick W. Carr** was born on an Air Force base in West Germany at the height of cold war tensions. He has been told this was not his fault. As an Air Force brat, he experienced a change in locale every three years until his father retired to Tennessee. Patrick saw more of the world on his own through a varied and somewhat eclectic education and work history. He graduated from Georgia Tech in 1984 and has worked as a draftsman at a nuclear plant, did design work for the Air Force, worked for a printing company, and consulted as an engineer. Patrick's day gig for the last eight years has been teaching high school math in Nashville, TN. He currently makes his home in Nashville with his wonderfully patient wife, Mary, and four sons he thinks are amazing: Patrick, Connor, Daniel, and Ethan. Sometime in the future he would like to be a jazz pianist, and he wrestles with the complexity of improvisation on a daily basis.

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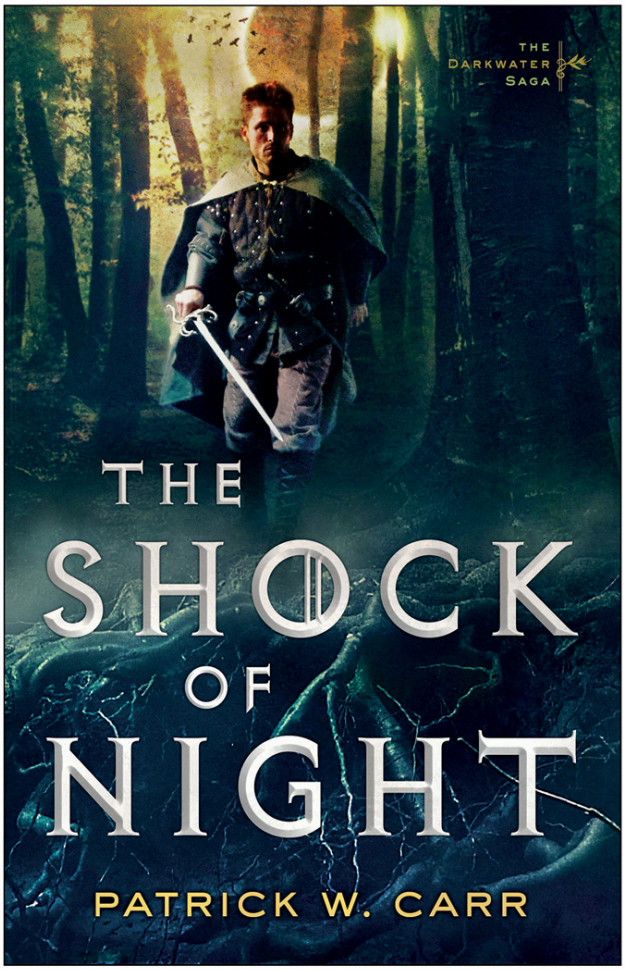


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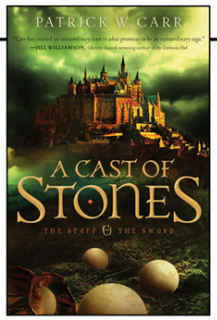


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